

“Fully Convinced”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, February 25, 2018

Mark 8 and Romans 4

Almost every Christian sanctuary has as its focal point the symbol of the cross of Christ; the presence of the cross of Christ universally marks a sanctuary as Christian worship space.<sup>1</sup>

Mark 8 is the first passion prediction, coming immediately after Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. It is only 2 verses before our reading that Jesus asked the disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am?’, and Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah’. And then Jesus ‘sternly ordered them not to tell anyone.’

It is a dramatic pivoting of narrative in Mark’s gospel that there is now this dramatic ‘openness’ to Jesus’ message – for he says to the people gathered around the disciples, ‘Anyone who wants to be a follower, deny yourself, and pick up the cross.’

It was dangerous talk in a public place and it was hard to keep a secret in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The language of the cross would have been stunning to this crowd.<sup>2</sup> Death by crucifixion was a horrible death and one which the Roman authorities flaunted in order to keep order. And here is Jesus talking about being killed on a cross, and asking others to take up their cross and to follow him.

“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” (vs. 31). There is the Passion story in a sentence.

“Even during Lent, we may prefer to look backward at the compassionate and welcoming Jesus and forward to the triumphant Christ without pausing to reflect on the agonizing, bloody death that is the focus of the Gospels.

Thus, like Peter, we fail to respond fully to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”<sup>3</sup>

Peter takes Jesus aside. And Peter rebukes Jesus about what he is saying. Peter seems to have assumed that Jesus’ messiahship would follow more traditional expectations: kingship, might, and victory, as we hear in Psalm 2: “You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” (2:9)<sup>4</sup>

The disciples are thinking, Messiahs don’t die. They are victorious. This Messiah standing in front of them is to be their salvation, and is to deliver them from the tyranny of Roman rule and re-establish the Kingdom of David. This Messiah is to crush others, not to be crushed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, Pastoral Perspective, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Workingpreacher.org Podcast for Feb 25 2018

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Theological Perspective, 70.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Exegetical Perspective, 71.

Jesus takes Peter aside, and chastises him with the words, ‘Get thee behind me, Satan’. And Jesus turns sharply back on Peter because he needs Peter to get it right.

‘Get thee behind me Satan’. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. You’re slapping a human imperative on top of my work. You’re seeing my presence through earthly eyes and you’re missing why I have come – to change the world in a way its never seen before.

Jesus was determined to set his journey to the cross in words that left no doubt as to its course – towards a horrible death on a cross. This wasn’t ‘safe’ talk.<sup>5</sup>

Reading the passage one can feel the stakes rising. There is suddenly more to being his disciple than watching Jesus heal and hearing him teach.

Having told them ‘plainly’ about his cross, he tells both the disciples and the larger crowds that if they want to be his disciples they are going to have to take up *their own crosses* and follow him, losing their lives in order to gain them.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus asks us to ‘Take up our cross.’ For Jesus, the cross was not the end of a journey, but the beginning of a new journey.

When Jesus asks us to take up our cross, it is a cross that points to something far greater than we could ever ask or imagine. It is a cross of purpose. A cross of hope.

By taking up a cross, we are followers of Jesus. Jesus wants followers, not just ‘believers’. Jesus wants you to let go of what is preoccupying you and to put those things aside, to pick up your cross and to follow him.

Our Old Testament reading today from Genesis 17 was the call of God to Sarah and Abraham. God led them out to a new land, a land they did not know, and there gave them new names and a new life.

Jesus call us, and leaving all behind us, to hold up nothing but the cross of new life given to us by the hands of our Saviour. Jesus calls us to this new life. Jesus has a mission for you and for me. One which will only be told in the living of it.

The Apostle Paul in Romans 4, our other reading for this Sunday, picks up on this faith of Abraham – who faithfully followed God’s calling wherever it led him.

Paul writes of Abraham’s faith, “No distrust made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God... being *fully convinced* that God was able to do what God had promised.” (Rom 4:20)

---

<sup>5</sup> [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) podcast, Feb 25, 2018.

<sup>6</sup>Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, Pastoral Perspective, 70.

The cross is a sign of purpose, of hope, of vision, of faith, and that we, like Paul and Abraham, are *fully convinced* that God will do as God says.

Hoping beyond hope, being *fully convinced* that God will do as God says, Abraham lived out his faith;

Paul lived out his faith,

and we live out our faith.

William Barclay, writing in the 1950's offers this: "God gave us life to spend and not to keep. If we live carefully, always thinking first of our own profit, ease, comfort, security, if our sole aim is to make life as long and as trouble free as possible,

if we make no effort except for ourselves, we are losing life all the time.

The very essence of life is in risking life and spending life, not in saving it and hoarding it.

True, it is the way of weariness, of exhaustion, of giving to the uttermost – *but it is better any day to burn out than to rust out.*"

Every sanctuary has a cross that all eyes lift up and see. Every Lent, Christians read the scriptures that lead us to the Cross of Good Friday.

Jesus says to us, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Why do we sometimes leave our crosses at the door when we finish worship?

Bless us and guide us on our Lenten journey, God of the Cross.

Amen.