

*Born Again*  
PPC  
Lent 2B  
28 February 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Mark 8:31-38

Traditional interpretation of these words from Mark have conveyed the idea that suffering is the will of God for us. This interpretation suggests that suffering of any kind can be redemptive. The implications in this interpretation imply that to resist suffering - to resist the crosses we have to bear - is to resist the will of God.

Interpreted this way, this text has always been a struggle for me. Is suffering due to abuse of power redemptive? When you are in an abusive relationship, must you, as so many women have been counseled by their pastors, remain in a marriage and become a better wife? Would God want any of us to experience this kind of suffering?

What if suffering due to abuse of power is not the will of God? And, in fact, it is never redemptive? What if we looked for more clarity and recognized that when Jesus calls for self-denial and cross-bearing, suffering in general is not what he means. Rather, it is suffering that comes our way is a *consequence of discipleship*? What if redemptive suffering is encountered as a direct result of following Jesus?

What is the “good news” in this declaration uttered by Jesus that “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34b-35)? What are we to make of this good news? It’s not the kind of good news and instruction that’s going to stand out in the self-help section of your local bookstore. You won’t find it trending on FB. You won’t read about it on magazine covers in grocery store check-out lanes. It

has nothing to do with losing weight, finding a mate, filling your plate, or sacrificing your giving so that you can buy a BMW. “And it sure isn’t about self-actualization, get-rich-quick schemes, or career advancement. But it is good news. It’s about life abundant.”<sup>1</sup>

As a people, we really don’t want to talk about suffering and death. Even in the midst of Lent! We want to spread cheer to cover up the suffering that is real for many. We prefer to look out at the world with our rose-colored glasses.

Jesus wasn’t on some masochistic mission. Rather, he knew that the path he had been set upon would inevitably lead to the cross. The status quo does not like to be challenged. We need only look out at the politics in this country to see the reaction that has resulted from BLM marches and a demand for equity. Jesus obeys God by following the path set out before him to speak to power in truth. Remember that voice that spoke to Peter, John, and James on the mountaintop - “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.” How often we just don’t want to hear what Jesus has to say; we don’t want to follow him because we can see what happened to him.

The womanist theologian, Raquel St. Clair, has written that the traditional interpretations of the text, calling for selflessness and bearing the burdens of others, have been detrimental in the lives of African American women in particular, and to women in general. At a certain time in our history, Black women were expected to serve as domestic workers or surrogate mothers, often at the expense of the care their own children needed. These jobs were taken out of economic necessity. St. Clair’s critique of the traditional interpretations of this text argues that in those interpretations

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<sup>1</sup> Sharron R. Blizzard at: <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/02/this-is-good-news>.

Jesus on the cross was disconnected from his life and his ministry. In his life, he resisted, nonviolently, social evils that deformed and defaced human life. He spoke out for the liberation of the marginalized and outcast by eating with prostitutes and tax collectors. His life and ministry conveyed that humans, not God are the source of suffering. Humans are the crucifiers, not God.

We see this enacted almost daily as people of color are jailed in greater numbers than white people. Remember the 6 January insurrectionist who was allowed to go to Mexico for a vacation, while she awaited trial. How many people of color sit in jails because they can't raise bail money and must sit in jail, awaiting trial?

In February of 2015, Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was declared a martyr by Pope Francis. His story illustrates what it means to follow Jesus, speaking out against abuse and power. Born in 1917, he spent his early years amidst books and scholarly pursuits. In his early career as a priest he at first sided with the conservatives of his church in San Salvador against the young radicals who wanted the church to take sides in the struggle between the government and the groups fighting for such reform as land re-distribution. Here, in Central and South America, liberation theology was born.

He was elected to the post of Archbishop of San Salvador with the backing of the conservatives who thought him a safe candidate who would not rock the boat. They had not counted on his capacity to be transformed or on his long-time friendship with the radical priest Rutilio Grande. Serving as his friend's conscience, Rutilio sought to open the eyes of the newly elected archbishop to what was happening to the poor people who lived in the countryside.

When Fr. Grande was murdered by a death squad, along with an old man and a boy, Romero took action by ordering that all Sunday masses be cancelled except for the memorial Mass to be held at the cathedral. Like those long ago priests of the Sanhedrin, other bishops opposed him, one complaining, "It will be interpreted as a political statement." Those oppositional bishops wanted to lead the Archbishop Romero in the way "that was in support of the corrupt government that labeled anyone who questioned its actions as a 'Communist.'"

This very private man who preferred reading books to wielding power was now called upon to defend his fellow priests from the murderous attacks of their enemies (the governmental forces) as he publicly spoke up for justice on his regular radio programs. In one showdown he had with armed soldiers occupying a church, surrounded by the people of that church, he said, "We are here today to retake possession of this church and to strengthen all those whom the enemies of the church put down. You should know that you are not alone, for you are the church. You are the people of God. In the here and now [Jesus] is crucified in you, just as surely as he was crucified 2000 years ago outside of Jerusalem. And you should know that your pain and suffering will contribute to El Salvador's liberation and redemption."

In the end, on the 24 March 1980, Oscar Romero himself shared in the crucifixion of Jesus as he was shot down in a hospital chapel while lifting up the Host in Mass.

Is it possible that "losing one's life" is more than a second date on a headstone? Losing one's life is about considering what it is we give our lives to every single second of every single day. That does take an awful lot of intentionality. Most of us are not

destined to be declared martyrs, but even so being followers of Jesus can make for a lot of “stirring up good trouble”.

The good news that Jesus is sharing in this week’s gospel sure doesn’t sit well with Peter. It doesn’t always sit well with us. Why can’t we just go along, minding our own business, living our private lives? The good news doesn’t sound so good when it involves crosses and speaking up and being persecuted. We might not be so popular. This good news sounds like it’s designed for downward mobility. Forget the ideal career trajectory or keeping up with the Joneses. The follower of Jesus is called to put their own self-interest aside and focus on the cross. This notion works completely counter to the way the world works. Of course we want to achieve the most we can and find worldly success. Peter brings that viewpoint to Jesus who harshly rebukes him. Do we pay attention to that rebuke?

Cross-bearing brings with it the daily tension of agitating - of naming and resisting suffering. “Followers of Jesus,” writes Ted Jennings, “must be willing to face the consequences of naming and resisting the crosses in our midst as they demonstrate the ‘audacity of solidarity with the crucified,’ thereby disrupting the status quo.”<sup>2</sup>

All-in discipleship is a choice to be yoked to Christ in, with, and among a body of fellow believers that is imperfect, sinful, redeemed, dying and rising daily, to new life. While we do a pretty good job of “doing” church we are called to re-examine what it means to “be” church in this world. We have a lovely building, satisfying worship, myriad programs and curricula and loving fellowship. But do we have the committed

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<sup>2</sup> quoted by Roger Gench at: Looking into the lectionary - cross bearing, *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2nd Sunday in Lent, Mon., Feb 22, 2021.

fellowship and passion for the good news? We are the hands and the feet and the heart of Jesus in the world today. How are we demonstrating to our community that we are followers of Jesus?

In this coming week, I invite you to go out and love like there is no tomorrow, to give more generously of your time and talent and treasure than you've ever done before. I challenge you to decide where you will sow kingdom seeds of hope, love, peace, and mercy.

Lent is a liberating reminder that we're not stuck. Because God speaks in new voices and in unexpected ways, change can come. We can resist the evil that surrounds us. Renewal is possible. In speaking up and out we will be transformed - personally and as a church. We will be born again to eternal life.

AMEN.