

Year B, the 2^{1st} Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24
October 17, 2021
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“They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.”

That verse from St. Mark’s Gospel comes right before the story of James and John jockeying for position at Jesus’ side. It establishes the state of mind of the 12, and it wasn’t good. They were scared, and for good reason. And Jesus didn’t do anything to assuage their fear, rather He makes another prediction of what was coming, “... they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” Scared was a reasonable feeling to have.

Are you at your best when you are scared? Sometimes, right? Fear can be call to courage, a call to overcome adversity, to be brave, to be selfless, self-sacrificing. Courage is not the lack of fear, it is mastering fear, it is moving ahead despite it. Ask veterans of the civil rights movement who faced horrendous violence, or of combat zones, or women anywhere facing a dark parking garage, or a partner with an evil temper. Fear is ubiquitous in those situations, and courage can arise in the face of that reality. Fear can bring out the best in us.

But fear doesn’t always bring that out in us, does it? There are more things to fear than fear itself. You know, most people near the end of their lives, most people I meet are not scared of death. Curious, sometimes, but mostly just accepting: it’s what’s next. Not resigned to the inevitability, but accepting of death as as natural a thing as being alive. Which it is. That said, a lot of people, while maybe not afraid of death, are afraid of dying. Dying, the process of dying can be hard because for many of us, dying will entail suffering. Most of us are afraid of suffering.

Suffering. According to our Buddhist brethren, life itself is suffering. That the first of the Four Noble Truths revealed by the Buddha: Life is Suffering. The Christian does not hold that all of it, life itself, is suffering. No, we are blessed to experience a world changed by God’s grace and mercy, blessed by the saving incarnation of Jesus Christ, animated and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. But as graced and blessed and alive as we might be, and assured of our reward and the nearness of the Commonwealth of God, we all also know that suffering exists.

The Cross is our symbol of the nature of reality. As we see it, yes, there is suffering. Horrendous evil can impose suffering, and does, all the time, like it did in Jesus Christ’s Passion

and Death. The Cross was designed for one purpose: to make people suffer. We need to remember that whenever we proclaim Christ Crucified, whenever we remember His Passion and the precious life He gave, “a ransom for many.” We know through Christ and through living in this world that suffering exists. We just also know that that suffering isn’t the end of the story. Suffering, estrangement, humiliation, even death, is not the end of the story. No, life is. New life is. Resurrected life at the right hand of God the Father, and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, now that is the end of the story, or, more accurately, is the beginning of a wholly new story that we can only imagine in our dreams.

And, suffering is real. It is terrible, and a loving God, while not able to prevent the occasions of suffering from happening, can hold us and comfort us like a mother does a child with a boo-boo. God, faith in God in Christ enables us, can enable us, to bear the burdens of life, to help others we meet along the way, and when the time of our own death comes, rest in the blessed assurance that while sin is inevitable, and suffering, all shall be well, all shall be well and every manner of thing shall be well. This is not the end of the story. It wasn’t for Jesus. It isn’t for you. You are worthy of the promises of Christ.

But that is hard to remember when a tragedy happens in your life. It is hard for COVID patients to remember lying in bed struggling for each breath; hard to remember as you care for your spouse as *they* suffer from whatever they suffer from; hard to remember in the darkness of grief and the agony of despair. It is hard to remember in the face of death. Fear is a much more demanding and loud sensation than quiet faith in Jesus Christ. Fear has led us to take our shoes off in airports for 20 years. It leads people to shun vaccines and take goat de-wormer to cure a respiratory infection. It leads to nihilistic government policies that put power over public health, political gain over the most common of sense in the face of 700,000 deaths and rising. Fear makes us defensive and aggressive. It blinds us to our better natures. It compels us to flee or fight, and though sometimes it does lead us to tend and gather the vulnerable, to be brave in the face of horror, it can do that, but fear more often brings out the far lesser angels of our natures.

One of the things the Church can do for us, one of the ways our Christian faith helps us is by giving us perspective, giving us maybe another perspective on life than our work-a-day take on things, our society’s conventional wisdom usually offers.

“Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...” That is part of it. Those are the words of pseudo-St. Paul in the Letter to the Hebrews. Jesus bids us to quest for our own Christ-nature, whereby we learn obedience through suffering on our way to perfection. That is part of the Christian life.

It is Jesus, though, who gives us the tools, the Way to the Truth and Life that God offers us so abundantly. In Baptism, in each time we gather at this table for the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, we are given a path to wholeness and holiness in the face of the suffering life has in store for all of us.

A homiletics professor at Duke has insight into how Jesus can lead us out of suffering. Considering the following verse in Mark, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized,” he reformulates it as, “You will not always be driven by your fears and your need for security. Rather you will be empowered to take up your cross and follow me. You will be faithful disciples even to the end.” He continues, “Here is the great promise for the Church. We need not live in fear; we need not continually seek our own security. Rather, we have Jesus’ promise that we can and will live as faithful disciples as we seek to follow him. It is an extraordinary promise made to such a fumbling, stumbling group of disciples – then and now!”

James and John were going to eventually be crucified as Jesus was. But as scared as they were on that road, Jesus promised them that it would not always be that way, that fear would not carry the day, nor suffering, but life eternal in Jesus Christ.

When you were baptized, each time you take communion here, you are invited, in the most mysterious of ways, into the way of the Cross with our Lord and Savior. The blessing we receive in that blessed Water and that consecrated Bread and Wine changes us far beyond the capacity of the matter involved alone, changes us from being on a fear driven quest for certainty and security, (which is utterly unattainable, though that is what the markets *really* want), and calls us and the whole church to a different path... the way of Jesus... the way of the servant of God.

That brings us to the Servant Songs of Isaiah, prophecies of the servant of God. This is the Fourth of them, a prophesy of the suffering and triumph of the Servant. The Suffering Servant has “borne our infirmities and carried our diseases,” was “stricken... afflicted...

oppressed,” “...wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities...” This passage makes up a large portion of the text of the Stations of the Cross liturgy. “...like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” This is a call to each of us to servanthood, servanthood in the key of Jesus, which is not an easy road to hoe.

The Servant Jesus was and the servanthood Jesus calls His followers too is, truly, a life and death endeavor. The principalities and powers of the world form powerful systems of structural sin that keep the poor poor and the rich rich, the weak weak and powerful powerful, and they play rough. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.” They play for keeps. And right here, the work we do around poverty through supporting H.O.M.E., and the Magic Food Bus, and the Ellsworth Free Clinic, if we followed the trail of what leads to homelessness, food insecurity and ignorance, and horrendously unequal access to health care, if we followed the plight of the North Atlantic Wright Whale and the burden our fisherman neighbors are bearing, and our seas... as Gandhi pointed out a long time ago (and Baird Ruskin), if we followed any of those trails to their end, we’d be in direct conflict with Empire, with the systems of domination that are breaking our planet and our society. Empire crucified Jesus. And His friends. And countless other servants of the living God, known and unknown, Christian and otherwise in every time and place people of conscience stand up for what is right. And those paths, those are the paths of servanthood. And sometime they lead up the long steep road to Golgotha. Sometimes they lead us to be enlightened like on that road to Emmaus, or struck down like on the road to Damascus. And sometimes, they lead us, maybe for a very, very long in the wilderness, but sometimes, they lead us to the promised land.

Servanthood can be expressed as kindness to someone who is hard to be kind to, tolerating someone who can seem intolerable, forgiving someone who is nearly impossible to forgive. It can be giving of your resources, your wealth and time and energy in supporting the ministry of this church, supporting our work to support a variety of agencies across the peninsula. Being a servant might entail digging deep in supporting an Afghan refugee whom we are helping come to GSA. He is still in Kabul and we can’t talk about it much yet, but servants will be needed to help to the

tune of 50-65,000 dollars. Servanthood could mean serving communion to your fellow church members, caring for this altar, this building, our finances, our life of prayer. Doing what needs to be done, helping those who need help, serving, not being served... that is the servant path. That is a path that can carry us, in the arms of Jesus, through all the suffering the world has to offer. And that is the path of Jesus Christ that we are all invited on. It is, often, the path of more suffering, the Empire all but guarantees that, but with Jesus by your side, it need not be a path of fear.

AMEN.