

**St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Sermon by Rev. Karen Joy Kelly  
Sunday, February 25, 2023**

**Year B Lent 2**

**“Get thee behind me Satan”**

**Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22: 22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8: 31-38**

Last week we heard of God's promise to Noah through the rainbow in the clouds.

This week God promised Abram and Sarai new names and a family... and a new nation. He promised them that kings would come from them and that they would be the ancestors of a multitude of nations. Imagine! And them in their 90s! No wonder Sarah laughed! (By the way, Isaac – the name they gave their son – means “laughter”.)

And in our Gospel this morning there is another type of promise ... the promise of a cross ... meant for Jesus and ultimately meant for his followers.

“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: 34]

We are told that obedience brings faith. Faith brings action. Action, in the name of Jesus, brings the cross ... and it also brings joy and new life.

Let us first consider this morning's gospel in perspective.

Taking up one's own cross in those early days was part of the punishment that preceded crucifixion ... that form of death meant for only the lowest of criminals. By Roman law, one was required not only to be crucified if that were the punishment given, but to carry one's own cross was part of the humiliation.

And, at the time this Gospel was written, Christians were undergoing horrendous persecution by the Romans. This particular Gospel was written to give encouragement, hope and to keep the persecuted going during their time of trial, especially when inviting all to take up their crosses and follow Jesus.

The second part of this Gospel to consider is Peter, and his reaction to all of this.

Consider that Peter had just declared Jesus as the Messiah; a fact that Jesus sternly told the disciples to keep to themselves at this point. He had been chosen as the rock, that firm foundation upon which the church would be created. He was named the second in command.

And the time had come for Jesus to reveal to the disciples what was ahead; what costs they must incur by following him. He began to teach them about his own pending death.

Peter could not stand it. You see, in Peter's mind, the Messiah was a king, an earthly king. One to whom power (and in this case all the power of heaven and earth) would be given. This means success, fame, wealth, and political clout. So, Peter, in his state of current confusion, had the audacity to take Jesus aside and began to *rebuke* him. (Interesting that the Greek word for *rebuke* is the same word used by Jesus to cast out demons. It is the word of exorcism.)

What follows becomes understandable. First, in Judaism, no one would ever rebuke a rabbi (teacher). It simply was not done. While Peter thought he was being diplomatic in taking Jesus aside he still crossed a very important boundary. One explanation is that Peter, like Jesus' own family, may have thought that Jesus himself was filled with demons ... or even insane in this moment of declaration.

Then, Jesus, turned right around and sternly *rebuked* Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" For Jesus heard the tempting of the devil in Peter's rebuke of him. In Peter's words, Jesus heard "worldly" culture rather than "kingdom" culture. And getting behind Jesus, the rabbi, would put Peter back in his proper place ... that of a student.

Jesus knew of his mission ... and it was not to conform to "success" in the way we understand it in the world. It was to turn the tables on the world's folly.

It is important to always keep in mind that, while Peter and others declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Messiah would not, could not, have been without the suffering, and without the obedience and absolute faith in God. There it is, both joy and pain are part of the same coin. Jesus then invited not only his disciples, but the crowd in general to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow" him. He then gives an end-time warning regarding his return and how he will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of him and his words.

Are we really, actually, being asked to suffer? Is this practical in our "pain-killer" addicted culture? How is it that we, in the richest country on the face of our planet ... we who want instant gratification ... instant answers ... should be called upon to suffer? After all, haven't we worked hard to get away from suffering?

How can we, through our faith, obey this exhortation from Jesus?

We are invited to think, not in worldly terms, but to think as we believe God thinks. Jesus, through his healing and compassion shows us that

God does not wish for us suffering. But to be clear, suffering and self-sacrifice are not undesirable. In other words, suffering and self-sacrifice ... the way of the cross ... are part of the way to the Kingdom.

In this week's *Forward Day by Day*, Julia Ayala Harris, president of the Episcopal Church House of Deputies, considers what this means for us today. She suggests that:

“We live in a time of truth-telling in our culture and society. The Episcopal Church's history with racial justice in our church and the larger society, our involvement in indigenous residential boarding schools, and our culture of silence and acceptance around power differentials and harassment are receiving a reckoning. We are finally talking about these things openly, just like Jesus was talking about truth openly.

When Peter rebukes Jesus, Jesus immediately understands that it is the dark forces and principalities—the structural, cultural, and institutional systems—that are trying to prevent him from speaking truth out loud. It is not his friend. Jesus tells Peter that he must lose his life in the culture to gain his life in Christ.

When we speak truth against these systems, we lose our lives for the sake of the gospel. We fade away, and the gospel ascends. Then we rest in the abundant grace of God and the love of our brother Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

(We, you and I, stepped into this water last weekend as we introduced the work of dismantling racism and racial reconciliation being done by the Episcopal Church at the Michigan Black Summit held right here at Lake Michigan College in Benton Harbor.)

Today, in the name of Jesus, I invite you to take up your cross and follow Jesus. What truth-telling do you think needs to be told in our church and in the community of Benton Harbor. Are you a truth-teller or part of the system—or both? Will you join with others in this new way of being church as we yearn to truly become part of the Beloved Community encouraged by our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry?

Dear friends, I invite you once again, this second Sunday of Lent, “In the name of the Church to the observance of a holy Lent, by continuing your self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word and to continue to make a right beginning of repentance.”<sup>2</sup> And, I invite you to join us in this work set forth by our denomination as the highest of priorities as we begin to learn what it means to be truly a part of “the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement.”

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, Julia Ayala, *Forward Day by Day*, Forward Movement, Cincinnati, OH, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> BCP, Ash Wednesday Service, p. 265

In the words of John Talbot,  
“Jesus is calling,  
My child will you take my cross and my burden  
Will you go and proclaim my gospel, my promise, my Word and  
my name,  
Take my healing, my mercy, my heart and my grace?”<sup>3</sup>  
Pick up your cross, turn yourself around (the meaning of *repent*) to  
seek life for St. Augustine’s in another direction, from another perspective.  
God will provide. It is his promise to all of us. Believe it when I tell you I  
know that.  
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> “I Will Say Yes”, lyrics by John and Wendy Talbot, 1986 Birdwing Music BMG Songs, Inc.