

St. Paul's, Concord  
Second Sunday in Lent  
Mark 8:31-38  
The Rev. Drew Courtright, Curate

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

The summer after my junior year of college, I had the opportunity to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was a youth and young adult pilgrimage run by the Kanuga Conference Center in NC. A group of just under 40 of us travelled around Israel and Palestine for two weeks seeing religious sites and experiencing the birthplace of our faith. From Bethlehem and Nazareth to Jericho and Jerusalem, it was an amazing experience which grounded my academic studies of theology within the geography of the Holy Land.

Near the end of our pilgrimage, we had the privilege of walking the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Suffering, also known as the Stations of the Cross. When doing the stations, it is customary for a person from the group to carry a wooden cross at the front of the group to signify that they are walking and praying the stations. As our leader informed us about this, he warned us that the longest walk between stations was between the 2nd and 3rd, so if we wanted to carry the cross but might have trouble with a longer walk on a hot Jerusalem summer day, best not pick it up at #2. When he said this, something moved inside of me and I felt called to carry the cross for that leg of the journey. When the time came, I stepped forward, picked up the cross, and carried it from the place Jesus had been judged and given the cross, to when tradition holds that Jesus first fell under the weight of the cross. It was a moving experience and one I will never forget.

That was one way to take up your cross. I wanted to carry it as long as I could, but the truth is even such a moving experience can't carry me through the rest of life. I have to take up my cross each and every day if I want to follow Jesus. But what does Jesus mean by “take up your cross?”

The cross that Jesus took up was a physical cross. It was the cross beam of a Roman execution device. It was thing that would bring him pain and suffering and ultimately death. Jesus knew this and he “spoke plainly about it.” He says, “the Son of Man must undergo suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Peter can't believe this and rebukes Jesus. But Jesus doubles down and says not only will he, the Messiah, die on a cross, but anyone who wants to follow him must deny themselves and take up their cross. Does this mean Jesus wants us to suffer and die like he did? Is that what Jesus, and therefore God wants from us?

There are two things to remember about the cross. First, as The Rev. Winnie Varghese says, "God does not give crosses, the world does." It was the elders, chief priests, and the scribes that rejected Jesus, and the Romans who handed him the cross. It didn't come down from heaven and descend on Jesus directly from God. The world gave it to him.

Second, the cross was painful, but it was the ultimate expression of God's love. God became Incarnate in Jesus and was willing to die in order to show us how much God loves us. It looks like defeat and death, and it was for three days, but God raised Jesus from the dead and defeated death, and so the cross becomes a symbol of love and sacrifice, despite its pain and suffering.

That's what Peter didn't understand. He had just named Jesus as the Messiah and then Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples just what that means—that he'll suffer and die and then rise again. But that is NOT what Peter had in mind. Peter's idea of the Messiah, and everyone else's for that matter, was someone who would overthrow the occupying forces, the Romans, and restore the nation of Israel back to power and to covenant faithfulness with God. Jesus did that but in a MUCH different way. A heavenly way, not an earthy way. That's why Jesus rebukes Peter so strongly. Jesus didn't come to set up an earthly kingdom. He came to call us to sacrifice self-interest and participate in the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven, a place where all are equal and loved and supported, by taking up our cross.

Finally, what's important about taking up our cross like Jesus did, is that doing so doesn't ignore or shy away from the messy parts of life. Rather, taking up our cross brings us into deeper engagement with ourselves and the world. That's what I learned from my experience on the Via Dolorosa. I had expected a somber, quiet, and contemplative walk where I could experience God in a deep, personal way. But just the opposite was true. It was a hustle and bustle thru the noisy streets of Jerusalem where people were shopping, eating, and walking all around us. And it was powerful but it wasn't all about me and God, as I had anticipated. I was with 40 other people, in midst of the holy chaos of life, following Jesus on the Way of the Cross.

So, what does it look like to take up our cross? We take up our cross when we admit we were wrong and ask for forgiveness. We take up our cross when we ask for help and someone else reaches out a hand. We take up our cross when we accept the things we cannot change and change the things we can. And we take up our cross by having faith, just like Abraham, that the God who brought new life out of an old woman, is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead, and is the same God who is with us when we take up our cross and follow him.

Amen.