

Mother Lynn Finnegan  
Church of the Holy Faith  
Second Sunday in Lent  
Gen 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25  
Ps 22:22-30; Mark 8:31-38  
February 25, 2024

### Immersive Followers

It has been a busy weekend, so I was grateful and relieved to find that I would be preaching today on such an easy gospel lesson. This passage is a pivotal moment in Mark's gospel, following immediately after a scene in which Peter proclaims Jesus as the Messiah. It quickly becomes clear, though, that Peter and the other disciples have little understanding of what "being the Messiah" means. Jesus teaches them openly, without the use of parable or allegory. The Messiah will suffer, die, and rise again. The truth Jesus speaks is the first of three passion predictions in Mark's gospel, as Jesus turns to his final days in Jerusalem. Each time, Jesus will get increasingly more explicit. In today's reading, he speaks of suffering, rejection, and death. He will later predict he will be betrayed, mocked, spit upon, flogged and killed.<sup>1</sup> Sandwiched in between these alarming teachings of suffering and death is Jesus' transfiguration we read about two Sundays ago. Clearly, this is A LOT of disturbing and perplexing information for the disciples to absorb. It is no wonder that, each time, they fail miserably.

In today's lesson, Peter is accused of focusing on human, not divine things. Human things such as earthly power and success. Revenge against the Romans. Triumph. A rise to the top. Peter's unwillingness to accept Jesus' version of Messiahship is understandable: while Jesus also speaks of "rising again" the disciples do not yet have a concept of resurrection. After the second

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:32-34

passion prediction, the disciples will respond by arguing over which one of them is the greatest. Following the third prediction, James and John will have the audacity to ask Jesus if they can sit at his left and right hand when he comes in glory. They just don't get it.

Which is why Jesus follows each prediction of his suffering, death, and resurrection with an explanation of what it truly means to be his follower. In today's reading, Jesus emphasizes the cost of discipleship: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."<sup>2</sup> Self-denial means taking a stand on the side of Christ. For the disciples, and Mark's audience living during the time of Nero's persecution of Christians, "taking up a cross," carried a specific horrifying image. The Romans used crucifixion as a gruesome means of terrorizing their subjects. Rebels, agitators, and insurrectionists were hung from crosses for days until they suffocated to death. Family members of the crucified disowned them for fear of their own persecution. Jesus is not mincing words. He will be killed for being an agitator and falsely accused of being an insurrectionist. He will be killed for decrying injustice, greed, and oppression. He will be killed for claiming to be the Son of God. If his followers persist in proclaiming the countercultural agenda he asks them to imitate, they may face the same brutal suffering he predicts for himself. Mark's audience would have been keenly aware of the risks that came with denying self and being a committed follower of Jesus. Like us, though, they would have the rest of the story, the story that would later be revealed to Peter. They would know the way of the cross, despite the risk, was a way of abundance, hope, grace, and salvation.

But what about us? We live in a space and time in which we are, nearly certainly, spared from the brutal suffering of martyrdom. A cross to us is a symbol displayed atop a church or as

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:34

personal jewelry. What relevance does taking up a cross look like for us? What does it mean to deny self? Let's first look at what it *doesn't mean*. Denying oneself is not a contrived sort of humility, or a particularly challenging circumstance, like calling your mother-in-law "my cross to bear." It is not a call to demean yourself or to suffer for its own sake. To "deny oneself" and follow Christ means to keep one's priorities in harmony with loving God and loving your neighbor. It means proclaiming the gospel message of love, forgiveness, and redemption, even if it causes hardship, ridicule, sacrifice, and discomfort. Eugene Petersen, author of *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* paraphrases Jesus' words in today's gospel: "Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, 'Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?'" Dietrich Bonhoeffer put self-denial even more succinctly: "It means seeing only Christ, who goes ahead of us, and no longer the path that is too difficult for us. Self-denial is saying only: he goes ahead of us; Hold fast to him."

If you have ever visited an art museum with rare or valuable artwork, you likely have seen stoic security guards and perhaps, like me, have enjoyed the experience of an alarm sounding off because you peered in too close to the painting. At most galleries, you know better than to touch anything without permission. Lately, however, there's a new trend in art, with exhibitors encouraging visitors to not only touch, but to interact physically. Called immersive art, the color, light, and sound give visitors the sensation of walking right into the artist's imagination, such as Van Gogh's starry night or Monet's lily garden.

An admirer of Christ stands in an art gallery, examining the paintings on the wall. Jesus, however, never called us to be admirers, keeping ourselves at a safe distance. When we take up our cross and follow Jesus, we instead enter an immersive experience, no longer standing with our hands by our sides. A follower walks right into the painting, tracing the footprints Jesus left and venturing into a radical life of faith, not knowing where it will lead, but knowing that Christ is leading. “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Amen.