

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

Remember when the first cell phones came out? It was a game changer for all of us. Suddenly we could just pull our phone out of our pocket and talk to anyone anywhere. It was amazing. Except for the spotty cell phone coverage. Some providers overlapped with others and then all of them left big gaping holes with no service. It seemed that we were always moving around trying to catch a signal and saying repeatedly into our phones, "Can you hear me now?"

Sometimes not being able to hear is not just a matter of cell phone coverage. Even when we are face-to-face with someone they might have trouble hearing us. A lot of it depends on what our message is and sometimes it can simply be the way our message is framed. There are many things that we just can't hear...bad news of any kind will qualify. That's why we are told to take someone with us when we need a consultation with a doctor particularly after lots of tests have been done and the doctor is going to share the results with us. Depending on what the doctor says, we may...or may not...be able to hear what's being said. Our less emotionally involved companion may be able to hear much better than we can.

In the gospel this morning, it seems that Peter is in that kind of dilemma. If we go a few verses back in this chapter of Mark, we can see that Jesus has fed thousands of people, he has refused to give the Pharisees a sign to prove who he is, he has chastised his disciples who are complaining about not having bread for not understanding what it meant when he fed thousands of people with practically nothing, he has cured a man's blindness in a two-step process, and he has asked the disciples what the local gossip is about him.

Then Jesus asks Peter, "Who do you say that I am?"

Without hesitation, Peter says, "You are the Messiah." No question in his mind.

That dream of the Messiah is strong and all pervasive for the Israelites. They have longed for centuries, for the one who will resume authority in Israel...the one who will restore King David's throne to its former glory...the one who will rescue them from the oppression on Roman rule. They have visions of a Messiah who is mighty and powerful. They are in Galilee now which is a

hotbed of insurrectionists plotting to overthrow Rome. All the buzz around them fuels the fire of expectation of the Messiah. They've been looking for him like crazy.

Now the disciples have seen Jesus heal people. They've seen him cast out demons. They've seen him perform miracles. People wondering if he's crazy or if he's just possessed by Satan himself. But Peter is *sure* this Jesus is The One...the one they've all been dreaming about...the Messiah. Hope is strong!! Life is about to get much better for the Israelites. All the disciples are 'all in.'

But the first thing Jesus says to Peter and the disciples is, "Don't tell anybody!"

And then Jesus begins to tell them about the nightmare that is about to befall him...great suffering, rejection, and execution.

Now everything stops. This won't compute. WHAT??????

None of that is on the agenda. None of that is what happens to the Messiah. What is Jesus talking about?

Peter takes Jesus aside and gives him a piece of his mind. In no way can any of this happen to Jesus. That's not the plan. That's not how this is supposed to work. Peter can't hear Jesus. He can't process all the things that Jesus is telling them.

And Jesus comes right back at him...calling Peter Satan...which must have stunned Peter and wounded him deeply.

You see, Jesus knew that he had the power to avoid the cross. He knew that he could get himself out of this situation. And can't we all imagine what a huge temptation that must have been for Jesus? He had the ability to avoid all that he could see ahead of him...all the agony and the humiliation and the pain. He could get out of the suffering if he chose to. So Peter's words were a huge temptation...even stronger than the temptations in the desert that Jesus had withstood.

But God doesn't think the way human beings think. And God has a plan.

We fall into a horrible trap when we begin thinking that God thinks the way we think. We fall into a trap if we believe that the things we think are important are also the things God thinks are important. We are so very human and we want for ourselves and for those we love, comfortable lives. We want success. We want to be admired by our peers. We want to have friends to hang out with and plenty of money to enjoy what the world has to offer. We want to have satisfying work. And we want to be healthy. But those are *not* the things that God thinks are important. In God's economy, the only way to be made whole is to let go of everything

society reckons most valuable...and that's oh so hard to do because we are oh so human. That's very hard to hear.

Looking beyond the disciples to the large crowd, Jesus tells them, "If you want to be my disciples, deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me." That must have been a very hard thing for those fascinated followers to hear. It couldn't possibly have made any sense to them. Who in their right mind would intentionally head toward the cross?

We know that the cross was a gruesome way to die, but as Christians, we see the cross in a different perspective. We see it as a sign of victory and hope. We know how the story ends. Those fascinated followers didn't. We make the cross the centerpiece of our worship spaces. The focal point in our own sanctuary is the large red cross hanging behind the altar with Greek letters that say, "Jesus Christ is victorious." We have beautiful brass crosses in other part of the sanctuary. And we dutifully follow a cross down the aisle in procession when morning worship begins.

Our emotional reaction to the cross is so much different than the emotional reaction of those who were following Jesus in Galilee. To them, there was nothing more horrible to contemplate than death on the cross. The Romans used crucifixion as a gruesome means of terrorizing people under their occupation by hanging rebels and agitators...people who caused trouble and disrupted the social order...from crosses...with arms tied to the crossbeams or nails driven through their hands. They lined the streets outside the city with men hanging from crosses for everyone to see...men who had dared to strike a blow for freedom for their own people. And they were left there to die in public...humiliated...naked and in pain...for several days until they suffocated to death.

Being told that this was their fate if they followed Jesus was something the disciples and the fascinated followers just couldn't hear. Even now when we have no fear of being crucified ourselves, this directive is hard to hear. We want to find some loophole...some way around this. Surely, we are not going to be asked to voluntarily suffer for Jesus' sake...not just suffer, but suffer because we are following Jesus. Surely that's not the cost of discipleship.

But it is. Whether we can hear it or not. Jesus tells us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. To deny ourselves means that we keep our priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us in the two great commandments: We love God and we love our neighbor. Most of us struggle with doing those two things...and sometimes we don't struggle very hard. Surprisingly enough, when we 'get out of ourselves'...when our focus is no longer on ourselves and what we want and how we feel, we find the source of true happiness. When our focus is on God and on others, we forget about ourselves. It doesn't mean that we never feel pain or that

we don't suffer hardship. Of course, we do. It means that our focus is on what we can do for someone else and how we can best worship the God we profess to love.

Lent is the season of reflection and repentance. It's a time when we take stock of ourselves and decide what we want to change about how we live our lives. What do we want to do differently? When we say the Confession each Sunday and we accept God's forgiveness, do we leave here knowing what we're going to do differently this next week? Remember, repentance is more than just regret. Repentance is changing direction...doing things differently. Being a Christian is not just a label or an identity. Being a Christian is the decision to submit to a lifetime struggle between what *we* want and what we know God wants *from* us.

If we accept the absolution on Sunday morning after recalling the sins of the previous week and we leave here without making a decision about how we want to avoid those same sins in the coming week then we are relying on what Deitrich Bonhoeffer calls 'cheap grace.' The grace of God is more than just a gift from God. The grace of God requires something from us in return...amendment of life. We can't accept the grace without participating in the struggle.

Jesus asks a lot from us. Jesus has done a lot *for* us. He's done the most important thing for us. He has redeemed us. But sometimes what he has to say is hard for us to hear. Sometimes we just can't hear him at all! But pursuing our relationship with him is more than a struggle. It is also a great joy. We don't follow Jesus because we want to get into heaven. We follow Jesus because to live that way...the way he asks us to live...is soul soothing and satisfying even when it isn't easy.

And Jesus is still asking us, "Can you hear me now?"

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.