

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

A few days ago I had the opportunity to get caught up with a dear friend that I hadn't seen for a while. We swapped information about our kids and our work and our creative ways of dealing with COVID-19 and eventually we got around to talking about Lent. What had we each given up this year? What, if anything, had we added? How was it going? And I began to think about the whole season of Lent and what it means and why we do...or don't do...what we do...or what we don't do. It seemed to both of us that the 40 days of Lent was designed to artificially replicate the mental, spiritual and emotional struggle that Jesus experienced during his 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. The temptation for Jesus was whether or not he was going to use his considerable powers to fulfill God's will or if he was going to use them to advance himself in this life. Somehow, giving up chocolate or alcohol or gossiping just doesn't create the same kind of experience for us. But all of us still need to answer this question on a regular basis: Are we going to do what God is calling us to do or are we going to protect ourselves and pursue our own interests?

The scripture passages we've just heard speak to us about faith: the faith of Abraham in hearing God explain to him that at the advanced age of 99, he still had fatherhood ahead of him. God told him that he would be the father of many nations. And Abraham believed it and lived his life believing it and it did come to pass just as God had told him it would. And the psalmist sings God's praises and his devotion to God and his faith that God will never abandon those who love Him. The praises for God in the psalm come from the living, from those already in the ground and from those yet unborn. And St. Paul in his letter to the Romans tells them and us that steadfast faith in God is far more valuable than adherence to the law. Living by faith is more important than living strictly by the law. Living by faith is about our relationship with God. That right relationship with God is what constitutes righteousness, not precise adherence to the law. That's a distinction that the Pharisees often missed. And it's one we sometimes miss as well.

As my friend and I chatted, we began to wonder about the meaning of the gospel lesson this morning. Most of us have heard this lesson many, many times. Jesus tells his disciples...and those in the crowd of people following him...that if anyone wants to follow Jesus, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. So exactly what did Jesus mean by "taking

up their cross”? What does ‘taking up their cross’ look like? For most of my life I have always believed that ‘taking up my cross’ meant doing things to help others that not only did not appeal to me, but were probably not part of the skill set that I had been given. It seemed to me that taking up my cross meant having to give up things that interested me or things that I do fairly well or things that used my skills. When we are asked to deny ‘self’, does that mean that we are asked to give up everything that is satisfying to us or the things that we do well and enjoy?

Jesus has just described to us what it’s going to look like for *him* to ‘take up his cross’: he’s going to undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. That’s not *his* will. That’s God’s will *for* him. And as he approaches those events, even Jesus asks God to let this cup pass from him. Jesus didn’t want to do it! And who could blame him? But in the end, Jesus did *exactly* as God had asked him to do. These events unfolded in Jesus’ life as a result of his speaking truth to power. They unfolded because his healing and miracles and exorcisms had created quite a stir and people were following him everywhere. Jesus did not intentionally antagonize the authorities, but he spoke the truth to them. His message (which was God’s message) and his popularity made those in power...earthly power...very nervous...and they had to get rid of him. Jesus saw all of this coming. He knew how this was going to play out and he didn’t duck the issue. He didn’t run away. Even though he wanted to be relieved of this horrifying experience, he stayed the course because that is what God had asked him to do. That was Jesus’ calling. That was Jesus’ literal cross.

But surely you and I are not going to be asked to submit ourselves to crucifixion in order to take up our cross. So what might ‘our’ cross be? There are no guarantees when we decide to follow Jesus that our life is going to be easy and pain free. As a matter of fact, Jesus tells us in advance that following him will be painful. It will hurt. No one’s life is pain-free whether they are following Jesus or not. But if we have decided to follow Jesus, then we know that when the hard times come, this is our cross and God is asking us to follow-through. Can you hear God calling you? Things happen in life that are not of our making and are beyond our control, but we are in a network of relationships. Other people are counting on us. If we’re going to follow Jesus then we don’t abandon people when the hard times come. We could be wending our way through life just fine when all of a sudden a hill appears in front of us. It may seem like a hill that we can’t possibly climb. And it’s not a hill of our own making. But neither was the hill that took Jesus to Golgatha. He carried his cross to the top because he had told God he would follow through. Sometimes we need help getting up that hill just as Jesus did when Simone of Cyrene carried Jesus’ cross for him after he fell. Even Jesus needed some help to complete the call that

God had given him. We will need some help as well. And God has promised never to abandon us even though Jesus worried about that from the cross.

Golgotha, the place of The Skull was at the summit of that hill. Jesus was crucified between two thieves. Jesus followed through even there. He offered solace to a thief hanging next to him who took responsibility for his own actions that had landed him on a cross. And he recognized that Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus promised him that on that very day the thief would be with Jesus in paradise. And at the foot of the cross stood Jesus' mother, Mary, and his disciple, John. In the tenderest of moments Jesus formed a community for them when he gave them to each other. Even on the cross, Jesus continues to offer comfort and solace to a sinner and to those stricken by grief just as God had asked him to do when he began his ministry. Jesus continued to follow through with his call.

When God calls us to follow through in those painful moments in life we need to be prepared to answer that call. The temptation is to run away. The temptation is to turn our backs on that which is painful and uncomfortable, but God is calling us to stay the course. God is calling us to follow through with His love and His message in climbing whatever hill has been placed before us. We don't create those hills. They simply appear in front of us. And sometimes people elect not to climb the hill. Sometimes they forget that God has promised never to abandon those who believe in him. They may choose to avoid the painful trek up the hill, but in doing so, they also abandon the hope that comes at the summit...the complete dying to our own wishes and the acquiescence to God which ultimate brings resurrection. There is no glory without the gory cross. There is no resurrection without death to self.

Sometimes God leads us to unusual places and circumstances, but God always makes sure that we are equipped to deal with those places and those circumstances. And God never abandons us to try to manage on our own resources. Like Simone of Cyrene carrying Jesus' cross to the top of the hill at Golgotha, God causes help to appear when we need it most.

Do people who don't believe in Jesus or in God have painful circumstances in life to deal with? Of course. And many of them stay the course, but a fair number of them don't. It's easy to run away from trials and tribulations. It's easy to escape into alcohol or excessive spending or mindless entertainment. It's easy to hide in our own homes to avoid dealing with the potentially painful. It's easy to be still and not speak up when we know that we have a truth to share. But we also know that the powers that be will rebuff us and that's scary. Being silent when we should speak is not what God is calling any of us to do. Each of us will determine for ourselves what constitutes our own cross. And each one of us will decide if we will take up our

cross as Jesus is calling us to do or if we will abandon all hope and run away in one way or another.

Staying the course...trudging up that hill...accepting the cross that is painful and difficult...is what ultimately leads us to resurrection. The alternative of playing it safe in this life is not a true life at all, but a mere shadow of the kind of life Jesus holds out to us on the other side of the resurrection. Pick up your cross whatever it may be. Embrace it as a necessary part of true life. Don't run away. Don't try to hide. Don't try to escape. Follow through. God is with you. It is in carrying that cross to its ultimate end that we find the true life that Jesus came to open up for us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.