

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
February 25, 2018 2nd Sunday in Lent
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will through Christ our Lord. Amen

I'm not what you would call an activist. I know many pastors who lead the way when there are marches for one cause or another. They are the kind of preachers who take up the issues of the day and call their congregations to action. Some of them write blogs and are quite outspoken on Facebook and other social media outlets. There is no question where they stand on any number of social justice issues.

As a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, like many other denominations, our practice is not to support a specific candidate from the pulpit. Our call is to preach the gospel into the realities of this broken world, and to encourage our members to vote and act based on the guiding of our faith in Jesus Christ.

I was advised by a pastor during the time of my internship to register as “independent”. That person felt it was unwise to affiliate with one political party or another. For the most part I agree with that. I like the freedom to vote for a person or an issue by the merits of that person or issue rather than feel obligated to tow a party line.

Sometimes, though, I find that this “independent” mindset holds me back from acting. I'm perfectly content to hide out in the middle ground between the right and left. But the gospel tells us that standing on the sidelines is not what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Our calling as disciples, as children of God, is to deny ourselves, get behind Jesus and follow him, carrying our cross.

The idea of following is not new with Jesus. Abram was called to deny himself and follow the path God would set for him and his family. You see, Abram was in line to be the patriarch of his father's family. He would have been the father of a clan or a small nation. Then God called him to deny that future, to leave behind the life he knew and expected, and follow God into an unknown future.

But it was a future with a promise. In the covenant God made with Abram in our first reading today God changed Abram's name to Abraham, a name that means “father of nations”—not just one little nation, but many nations. Sarai, too, was given a new name, Sarah, with the promise that she would be the mother of nations.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that Abraham and Sarah followed God's leading by faith, without seeing the fulfillment of God's promise. They saw their child, Isaac, but those nations and the descendants that would be as many as the stars in the sky—they never saw that. Abraham followed God, trusting in God's promised future beyond his own lifetime.

Peter is another picture of faith for us. Remember, Jesus gave Peter his name which means “rock”. Just before our gospel reading today, Jesus had asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered with rock-solid faith, “You are the Messiah!” Yes! Peter knows who Jesus is!

But his understanding of what that means for Jesus—and for his disciples—falls short. It doesn’t make sense that the Messiah, the anointed One who is the fulfillment of God’s promise would undergo great suffering and rejection and be killed!

I’m pretty sure by the time Jesus got through saying those three things Peter had stopped listening and missed the part about Jesus rising again.

Peter rebukes him, argues with him, rejecting the idea that this could be possible!

Then Jesus calls Peter Satan. Our English translation gives that word a capital letter, like a name, and marks it with an exclamation. In Greek the word satan means “adversary”. In other words Jesus says, “Get behind me instead of arguing with me, and remember what I called you to do in the first place, Peter. I called you to leave yourself, leave what is comfortable and expected of you, and follow me, even as you take up the cross God gives you to carry.”

Peter did that once, already. He left his family and his fishing business and followed Jesus. Now Jesus is preparing him and the other disciples for another journey of faith— a journey that will take them to a garden and watch their beloved teacher pray, weep, and struggle; a journey that will take them to a courtyard and face accusations of associating with Jesus the heretic; a journey that will take them to an actual cross to witness a death that would make them question everything they had experienced with Jesus over the past three years.

And, oh yes, a journey that would take them to an empty tomb, and an upper room where the risen Christ would appear to them and give them another new calling as preachers and apostles.

But they couldn’t see all that in the moment of our passage today. And neither can we see what God has in store when we are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus into situations that are at least uncomfortable and at most downright scary. But we do so bearing our new name given to us in Holy Baptism, the name of Christian—Christ-follower.

What might our crosses be?

As I think about the shooting at the school in Florida last week, I continue to wonder about Nikolas Cruz. If we could look back on his life, when did things start to fall apart? When did he first become disconnected to a safe, stable, loving environment? If that was never the case for him and his family, who might have stepped in to provide some support or connection? And then I wonder, am I seeing those in our community who have become invisible to the rest of the world?

Looking back over the past couple of years in our country, we have so many issues that are dividing us—shootings involving police and people of color; men in positions of power accused of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence; arguments over access to health care, access to guns, access to water and food and jobs that provide a living wage and many others.

Taking up our cross isn't necessarily choosing one side or the other. Taking up our cross is about choosing to follow Jesus into places where there is brokenness and division. It is about denying ourselves, stepping out of our comfort zones and our positions of privilege and power and our need to be right, and looking at the world through someone else's eyes. Taking up our cross means trusting that Jesus is already ahead of us, leading us to bring his good news into difficult situations.

So maybe we will take time to listen to the person who is angry with the world. Maybe we will confront the abuser and learn that their behavior comes from a lifetime of pain and suffering. Maybe we will stand up for one who is being abused and let them know that they have support and a voice that is heard. Maybe we will volunteer to take in a foster child before they come to believe that the whole world is against them.

Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, not because we are not valuable, but because we are! There is a world in need of what we have received through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—a faith that God is present in this world and has the power to bring healing and new life into places of brokenness and despair.

That is the cross that we carry—a cross of hope, a cross of faith, a cross of promise. Let us carry that cross with confidence following Jesus into the places where the love of God is needed most. Like Abraham, we may not know how our lives will impact the world beyond what we can see. But we are called to follow anyway, not knowing if or how we are making a difference. It is by faith that we trust that God is at work in us and beyond us to bring healing and new life to a hurting world.

Let us pray.

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.ⁱ

Amen.

ⁱ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Evening Prayer p. 317