



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

March 7, 2021

The Journey III: Thy Will Be Done

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**The Journey II:
Thy Will Be Done**

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: March 9, 2021

The Journey III: Thy Will Be Done

During this Lenten season, our sermon series and the devotions written for and by Westminster remind us to see the divine in ordinary objects as we journey to the cross and empty tomb.

Today we consider a symbol of the very center of our faith, the cross.

Crosses adorn our sanctuary and decorate our bodies so ubiquitously that the author of the book underpinning our series included them as “ordinary” objects.

When the cross turns into something ordinary, we risk becoming immune to how Jesus binds himself to us by it. And, more notably, with crosses cast in shiny brass, encrusted with diamonds, or inked into skin, we might forget its origin and promise.

A bit of context for our Gospel lesson.

Before the cross became a symbol of faith, it was the preferred method of execution by the Romans. In the sixth year of the Common Era, the Romans crucified over 2,000 Galileans and lined the road to Jerusalem with their crosses.

For decades, crucified bodies hung as billboards for all to see the ultimate penalty one would pay for disrupting the status quo.

Death by lynching appears merciful compared to the days-long suffering of being stripped and bound to a tree.

To anyone in that time, mere mention of the “the cross” incited mortal fear. Everyone longed to be free of the cross’ threat.

Turning to our gospel lesson.

Jesus attracted crowds who witnessed his healing and teaching and feeding during his ministry in Galilee.

After three-years Jesus pauses to ask them on their way to Jerusalem, “who do people say that I am,” and then more pointedly, “who do you say that I am?”

Peter responds for all time, “You are the Messiah.”

Please pray with me.

Holy God, we seek to confess and follow Jesus as our Messiah. Silence in us the noise that distracts us or distorts your word. Startle us with the truth so that we set aside any false ideas and confidently became one of his followers. Amen.

Mark 8:31-38

³¹ Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind

me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴ Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is arguably one of the more perplexing and dangerous of Jesus’ teachings.

Perplexing in that we wonder why his followers would willingly continue with him to death. It is dangerous for the ways his words have been twisted through the ages to condone suffering.

The first sentence of the Gospel of Mark sets out to tell the good news of Jesus the Messiah.

Prophets of old promised a messiah would route their oppressors and restore the Davidic monarchy.

Awed by the way Jesus healed and fed thousands from mere scraps, Peter followed him, perceiving from such remarkable power, this man must be the long-promised messiah.

A crown, like David wore, a crown of glory would surround this Messiah.

When Peter professed Jesus was the messiah of course he recoiled to learn Jesus would suffer, be rejected, and die. In his horror, Peter never heard Jesus promise to rise three days later. The cross stopped him.

Peter signed up for glory, not agony, knowing full well that if Jesus were convicted, he too would be hung as high as an accomplice.

Oh, how tempting it is to find and follow someone or some path that promises glories and riches.

The sharp rebuke Jesus inflicts on Peter, “get behind me Satan,” harkens back to Satan tempting Jesus in the desert as he prayed and prepared for forty days before launching his ministry.

Satan is anything or anyone that gets between you and God’s divine will.

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At that time in the desert, and for all time, Jesus refused a life with fame, wealth, and the ability to dominate others.

Undoubtedly Jesus never told Peter that he had refused what Peter most likely valued.

The whole course of Jesus' life led to the cross.

Notice that Jesus does not say seek out a cross nor suffer.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus claims the first commandment to "love God and love yourself," to put God first.

And to love yourself as God loves you means you will not tolerate the abuse of others. This gets to the dangerous use of this passage I alluded to earlier.

In the past, victims of domestic abuse were sent back into his or her marriage or family with the statement – "this must be the cross you bear." Just be quiet and not upset your parent or spouse.

Or those enslaved or impoverished by a system of injustice were taught their suffering brought honor and intimacy with Jesus.

True messiahship is about compassion. Suffering does not save; rather, God saves, and one of the things God saves us from is our violent ways, including our destructive ideas of inflicting and tolerating the pain of others.

Jesus calls us to end or alleviate suffering whenever possible, and to “take up a cross” as our inspiration to do the hard and holy work of following him.¹

The cross will always radiate an array of meaning, beginning with Christ’s death and descent into hell. Through Jesus, God assures us that we can never be abandoned or stray too far as to be outside of salvation’s reach.

Peter Abelard the twelfth century, wrote in Christ’s passion God “has more fully bound us to God’s own self by love, with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace...(and) we should not shrink from enduring anything for him.”²

Awed by the depth of Jesus’ love and courage, we want to be more loving in return.

To pick up our cross, our hands and hearts must be free of distractions or our own self-centered plans.

We pick up our crosses, not to humiliate ourselves, but out of a sense of divine purpose, we carry them to victory as with Jesus.

¹Mathew Myers Bolton’s podcast from SALT and this companion commentary inspired this theology of the cross. “Cross Purposes: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent,” 2 Feb 23, 2021, SALT, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/20/cross-purposes-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-2>, accessed March 1, 2021.

² Peter Abelard, *Commentary on Romans 3:26; A Scholastic Miscellany*, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (New York: Macmillan, 1970)283. Quoted in William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 131.

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The cross you bear may be as witness to ethics abuse in the workplace, someone consistently padding an expense report, overlooking qualified candidates because of prejudice, letting know toxins infect products and people. Whistle blowers pay a heavy price. But you find a way.

The cross you bear may be to no longer stand in silence as a sexist joke falls casually into conversation. You name the offense.

The cross you bear today may be the gnawing, relentless, need to stop the racial injustice. Speaking out may build a wall between neighbors, risk being shunned, or any other fear mongering tactic, so you do not disrupt the status quo. And yet, you march and advocate.

The cross you bear may be to cast off all of what you had planned in 2020 to instead teach your children when the pandemic demanded you to lay down your dreams.

How many parents are at wits end with an ear bud in one ear for work-related zoom calls and an ear bud in the other to monitor a child's math class? No one signed up for that. Lament the hardship. And let others carry this with you.

The pandemic placed a cross in everyone's path.

Throughout the year, we counted the days and months of isolation, waiting for a miracle. Today marks the one-year anniversary of COVID shutting down the rhythm of our lives.

We set aside plans. We refrained from doing much of what we loved in the hope that we would staunch the virus and the suffering of those infected.

We learned to be still.

So many essential workers bore the brunt of life-threatening labor to ensure food shelves remained stocked and all the grocery bags and boxes were delivered.

Doctors and nurses, who trained for care, became heroes in hospitals and faced threats as they stood up to the lies in the public arena and on social media.

Too many lost jobs and income.

As we gaze on the fifty candles, each representing ten thousand beloved sons and daughters, and friends dying to COVID, we remember their lives.

We grieve over half a million deaths in this country and pray for the order of magnitude more of people who endure their absence.

Jesus' death on the cross, ugly and inhumane, was not the end. As promised, God raised him.

On this anniversary, we hear the call to pick up our crosses to live in ways that restore our broken communities, nation, and world.

We live in ways that answer our prayers: God, thy will be done.

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Be still and know these lights shine against the darkness.

Be still and know that Jesus will guide us forward.



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