

Rev. Heather Apel – Indiana-Kentucky Synod
February 28, 2021 – 2nd Sunday in Lent
Mark 8:31-38

Gospel: Mark 8:31-38

³¹[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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Heavenly Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Several years ago, I was on a pilgrimage through the Holy Land with Trinity Lutheran Seminary. It was an incredible trip as you might imagine, and that experience has changed the way I read and understand scripture. One insight (of many) that I gained was the physical landscape of this region and the implications this would have had on Jesus, his followers and the people of that area and time. Many of the places we visited were located near a body of water, which means that the small towns and villages were separate, but not too far apart, making travel between them possible. However, they certainly didn't have the nice, air-conditioned bus that we were using to get around, since we know that they most often traveled on foot from town to town, or occasionally by boat across the sea. It is no wonder that so many of our stories in scripture take place while Jesus and the disciples are journeying from one place to another. They didn't seem to stay in any one location for very long and were constantly on the road.

Right now, we also find ourselves constantly on the road as we journey to Jerusalem in this season of Lent. When I read the gospel text to prepare this message, I began thinking about how Jesus and the disciples' physical journeys throughout the land, are also symbolic of the life of discipleship. To be a follower of Jesus is not merely about trying to achieve a certain goal in life – as if we can

somehow “arrive” and complete our calling as a disciple once we reach a certain level of faith or complete enough good deeds for our neighbor. Being a follower of Jesus is more about being “on the way” with God, going through life’s moments of extreme high as well as low, and paying attention to what is happening on that journey.

If anyone knew about the ups and downs of being “on the way” with Jesus, it would be Peter. Right before today’s reading from Mark, we hear this, “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:27-29). Peter, who in one moment utters one of the truest declarations of who Jesus is, clearly didn’t understand what Jesus was really about, since minutes later he is rebuked by Jesus when Peter opposed the revelation that Jesus’ messiahship would include suffering, rejection, and death. Jesus’ mission and ministry were clearly counter-cultural to the ways of the world – and it was this commitment to God’s healing of the world, and refusal to back down in the face of those who would oppose him, that eventually lead to Jesus’ suffering and death.

Peter, who had been with Jesus from the beginning, and had witnessed all of his miracles and listened to all of his teachings, was still learning (and getting it wrong at times) while he was “on the way” with Jesus. It was an ongoing, ever-evolving relationship and path of discipleship. After Peter’s failed attempt to mold Jesus into the Messiah he envisioned him to be, Jesus turns to the gathered crowd with this teaching, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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” (Mark 8:34b-35). That is a tall order for anyone who heard it then and hears it now. However, Peter’s own journey of discipleship, which included denying Jesus three times, gives hope to us today who are “on the way” with Jesus. Peter may have made mistakes or misunderstood what was happening, but he continued “on the way” with Jesus, and eventually became the rock on which the early church was built. Jesus didn’t expect him, or any of the other disciples, to get it right the first time, and thankfully, the same is true for us.

As we hear this call of Jesus to take up our cross, follow him and lose our life for the sake of the gospel, we know that for many of us living in North America, there is little cost to our call of discipleship, when we compare our experiences to the early church, or what many of our siblings in Christ face around the world. And yet, as we look back on the struggle of past 12 months, and face the recent sobering statistic of more than 500,000 dead from COVID-19 in the US, and

look across the Indiana-Kentucky Synod to see so many communities who are wrestling with how to remain faithful witnesses of the gospel in these times, we know that walking “on the way” as a follower of Jesus is not always an easy road. There are times when we can be just like Peter – bold and faithful in our declarations and actions as part of God’s kingdom breaking forth in this world – and then moments later misunderstanding what God’s grace and salvation is all about as we slip up and turn our views of that Kingdom inward upon ourselves.

Which is why we can give thanks for the good news that as disciples of Jesus in today’s world, we are each “on the way” with God. Our journeys and paths will not look the same, and we will face our own twists and turns along the way. There is no final checkmark or faith achievement that we can reach in this life that will earn us the title of “disciple” because that title was already given to us in the waters of baptism when we were named and claimed as children of God. Everything else from that point forward has been our life lived “on the way” as we grow in our knowledge and relationship with God. And we give thanks that we don’t have to walk this journey alone. We have family and friends, and faith communities, who come alongside us “on the way” – to encourage us, sometimes to push us in new directions, to support us when needed, and to share in both the tears and the laughter that comes in life. We don’t have to worry or fear when we find ourselves in a place “on the way” when we are struggling with our faith or feelings of doubt – because God will not abandon us on the journey, as Jesus meets us “on the way” and walks with us. Jesus may show up in the face of our pastor or deacon, in our neighbor down the street, in a member of your Bible study group, a stranger at the store, or even someone that you connect with on Zoom. God has given us the company of saints who are also “on the way” to be our companions as we journey down the path of discipleship.

Our participation in God’s Kingdom may continue to look different in the coming days as we move on down the path of discipleship. The ways that we are called and able to join in God’s ministries – whether in our daily lives or among our siblings in Christ in our faith communities – will change and evolve with each new opportunity that comes our way. God is at work in this world – doing new things – and calling us to be a part of the Kingdom as it breaks forth in our own lives and the lives of those around us. May we all have eyes to see God “on the way” and a heart to love like Jesus as we follow the cross-marked discipleship path today and every day to come. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

Your gift of grace is for all people. Give confident faith to all the baptized, that they may follow you wholeheartedly. Give new believers joy in your promises; give hope and courage to those who suffer for their faith. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

All the ends of the earth worship you. From galaxies to microorganisms, preserve your creation. Teach humanity to wonder at your works and to join you in tending to creation's well-being. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You rule over the nations. Raise up advocates for peace and justice within and between nations. Give life where hope seems dead; call into existence new realities we cannot even imagine. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In Jesus you joined humanity in suffering and death. Reveal to all the depth of your love shown on the cross. Accompany all who suffer in body, mind, and spirit. Restore all who are sick or grieving. Bring vindication for victims of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We await the day of Christ's coming in glory. Lead us by the example of all the saints whom you have called to take up their cross and follow you, that together we may find our lives in you. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Let us join our voices together in prayer using the words that our Savior taught us... **Our Father, who art in heaven,**

**hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.**

Blessing and Dismissal

You are what God made you to be:
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
chosen as holy and beloved,
freed to serve your neighbor.

God bless you ☩ that you may be a blessing,
in the name of the holy and life-giving Trinity.
Amen.

Go in peace. Share the good news.
Thanks be to God.