

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

The Other Side of God's Power

Walking with Jesus is a life-long journey, and learning what it means to follow the way Jesus walked is not a course you can take for a few months and graduate. The word "Disciple" means a "learner." Following Jesus as his disciples takes our entire life, in more than one sense. There's no "Certificate of Discipleship" you can hang on the wall, and yet it is what marks us as Christians and defines the Christian Life.

To help us with this life-long journey, the forty-day season of Lent emerged in the early 4th century as a focused time of self-examination in light of what it means, at the core, to follow Jesus and to live as his disciples. Through the Scriptures, we learn from Abraham and Sarah, the parents of our ancestral faith. Abraham, listened to God who appeared to him as El Shaddai, the uncertain meaning of the name is traditionally translated as God Almighty, but it carries the image of mountains, so El Shaddai, God of Mountains.

The year I came to the US, the contemporary Christian singer-songwriter Amy Grant had a hit song by that name: El Shaddai, El Shaddai, El-elyon na Adonai; Age to age You're still the same by the power of the name. And this almighty God of mountains told him to walk before God, and be blameless.

Now, blameless does not mean perfection, or without sin. Rather, to be blameless is to be ever-faithful, ever-loyal to God. And Abraham listened to God, and God changed his name from Abram, which meant "exalted ancestor" to Abraham, "ancestor of a multitude of nations. The God of Mountains also changed the name of Sarai to Sarah, saying she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples (all plural) shall come from her. In the Covenant with Abram and Sarai, God showed that God is the God of all the nations, for all generations.

They lived up to the names God gave them, becoming who God said they were. They didn't choose their names; God did. A few years after I came to the US, I was entering college, and I remember asking myself I those days, who am I, perhaps because I was constantly being reminded that I was Japanese in America. I remember finding comfort and security in knowing, before I am anything, I am a child of God, then I am Japanese. 40 years later, I am still a child of God first, then a Japanese American. Who am I? Who am I in Christ? This is also a question Lent asks of us for self- reflection and examination.

Because we, too, are the children of the God of Abraham, at the center of our being rest blessing and promise of the Covenant. This is a covenant that cannot be broken even as we follow Jesus, whose destiny is our destiny, the cross, the grave, and the empty graves.

And we learn who we are in Christ also from the original disciples, those who actually got to follow Jesus, those who heard the voice of God coming out of the clouds atop the high mountains telling them, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!”

Today’s Gospel story is about how Peter did not listen to him. We got to thank Peter for all mistakes recorded in the Bible, so we can catch ourselves when we are tempted to make the same mistakes, or see our mistakes reflected in his, for it is hard to notice our own mistakes.

To be fair, at the beginning of this passage, Peter had not yet been told by God to Listen to Jesus, for today’s passage actually comes right before the story of the Transfiguration we heard 2 weeks ago, when Jesus took with him the inner circle of his disciples, Peter, James and John to the high mountain. It was there, Moses and Elijah appeared, and the disciples saw them talking with Jesus, and the voice out of the clouds told them, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” Perhaps God decided Peter needed a reminder of who Jesus was and that he needed to listen to Him, because of what had just happened.

And what had just happened is this. Up to this point, the disciples had been following Jesus and watched him heal many people who were sick, blind, or possessed by the unclean spirit. They witnessed Jesus restore the life of a girl considered dead and feed thousands of people with a few scraps of food. They even saw him walk on the water. Such amazing power he had.

Not only that, in the synagogue Jesus wowed the crowds by teaching as one with authority, and he stood up to the criticism of religious leaders, the power-that-be in their community, and pushed boundaries reaching out to the outsiders. All this authority and the divine power Jesus had exhibited led Peter to declare Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed, the Christ. And when Peter said so, Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone about him.

Why? Because, even with all that they have seen Jesus do, their understanding of Jesus as the Messiah was still incomplete. At this point, Peter understood Christ only as a powerful healer, teacher, and leader, which he had witnessed Jesus to be, but that’s only one side of what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ.

Now, see what happens to Peter, when Jesus tells them the other side of how he is God's beloved Son and what it means for him to be their Messiah. Just when Peter had his "Aha!" moment and thought Jesus was the One who would save the Jews from their oppressors and restore their dignity as God's people, Jesus started to say some strange things, like the Messiah would suffer, be rejected and killed. Jesus also said, "and after three days rise again," but Peter was so disturbed that the Messiah should suffer and die, he couldn't listen to anything beyond that.

God's power with which Jesus was endowed was also the power that does not avoid but endures suffering, even to the point of death, and to rise from it. Jesus was now speaking not just to the disciples but also to the crowd, openly and publicly, because this is what makes their understanding of Jesus as the Messiah complete.

But Peter was not ready for that full picture of the Messiah who would be rejected and killed; it contradicted what Peter wanted the Messiah to be. And so, what does Peter do. Instead of Listening to him, he grabs Jesus aside and scolds him! Gets angry with Jesus, even. Don't we also, when God disappoints us? The word describing Peter's action here is rebuke, and it's the same word used to describe Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit. Peter the disciple, the learner of Jesus, is out of line here. It is quite out of order for the pupil to rebuke his master. And yet that's what Peter did; he was trying to teach Jesus what it meant to be the Messiah, because, from what he heard (but not really listened,) Jesus was clearly misinformed about his destiny as the Messiah. Jesus, in turn, calls this thinking in Peter out, and tells "Satan" to "get behind me." You, be AFTER me, where you belong.

Peter's furious protest bespeaks of his fear of suffering that gets in the way of his really "listening" to Jesus. And we are right there with Peter. At the root of our fear is fear of suffering and death and God knows this. Had Peter really listened, Jesus didn't stop at the prediction of his suffering and death but went on to tell them about the resurrection that awaits beyond his death. But Peter was so upset to have his image of the Messiah broken, he couldn't "listen" beyond that to get to the Good News.

Jesus as the Messiah is not just powerful, wise and authoritative leader. The compassionate suffering and dying Christ doesn't paint a complete picture either. There is yet another dimension to his Messiahship; the risen Christ. The necessity of suffering and the fear that it evokes, is so Jesus can overcome it. The ability to suffer and even die in order to bring

New Life, that's the other side of God's power in Christ. And that power that overcomes the suffering, what is stronger than death, is Love. Jesus lived and died and was raised to show this is so, and so it is with us, because it is the way of God.

Wanting to avoid suffering, refusing to become vulnerable and admit our human weakness, not trusting God of Love that carries us through everything, is to be thinking of "human" things. Trusting in God, Jesus goes through suffering to come out on the other side, so we no longer live captive to the fear of death or suffering. If we follow Jesus all the way to the end, that "end" is not death but eternal life.

God does not desire human suffering but knows our lives are not free of it. So, God takes on the suffering in Jesus in order to show God's love and care is greater. That's how "suffering is also in God's plan," It is in God's plan only to be overcome by even greater God's Love." To "overcome" it, one must "deal with" it, "engage with" it, "experience" it, as if to "tackle" it. And that's what Jesus does, for our sake, and that's what Jesus calls his disciples to do. To take up our cross is to engage with the suffering of the world, yours and mine, for the sake of the gospel, the good news that Love is greater than Death. Suffering is not the human destination God desires for us, the kingdom of God is.

Back to the passage. Jesus follows up to bring their attention back to the concluding part of his message. Those who lose their life as a result of living the life obedient to God's way, will find life that can never be destroyed. The Death is not the last word; it wasn't for Jesus, and it won't be for those who follow him.

On APD chaplain calls, I minister to those who are in the acute moment of suffering, on the worst day of their lives, having just lost their loved ones, whether it is to illness or accident. I cannot take away their pain and suffering; I cannot bring their loved one back, nothing could. And I cannot be there in the days and weeks that follows, as they live with their new friend called grief. All I can do is to sit with them as they suffer, bearing witness to their pain. But before leaving them, I ask them to remember when the pain gets overwhelming, that their hearts and whole being ache because they loved, and Love is stronger than death. Your pain may be deep, but Love goes even deeper. And that's a promise. I have my late husband to thank, for showed me the truth of it in my life. Jesus walked toward God's promise, being sent from God's bosom, through the water of baptism, into the desert, among the people, onto the Cross, and to back to God's bosom and the Eternal Life. Thanks be to God.