

Follow Me
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Mark 8:31-38

³¹ Then he 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.’

³⁴ He 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.’

I know we’re in the wrong season and I’ve come to understand that this song is much more a Catholic song but there is something in it for us, in this season. The lyrics of the song *Good King Wenceslas* are these:

Good King Wenceslas looked out
on the feast of Stephen,
when the snow lay round about,
deep and crisp and even.
Brightly shown the moon that night,
though the frost was cruel,
when a poor man came in sight,
gathering winter fuel.

Hither, page, and stand by me.
If thou know it telling:
yonder peasant, who is he?
Where and what his dwelling?
Sire, he lives a good league hence,
underneath the mountain,
right against the forest fence
by Saint Agnes fountain.

Bring me flesh, and bring me wine.
Bring me pine logs hither.
Thou and I will see him dine
when we bear them thither.
Page and monarch, forth they went,
forth they went together

through the rude wind's wild lament
and the bitter weather.

Sire, the night is darker now,
and the wind blows stronger.
Fails my heart, I know not how -
I can go no longer.
Mark my footsteps, my good page,
tread thou in them boldly:
Thou shalt find the winter's rage
freeze thy blood less coldly.

In his master's step he trod,
where the snow lay dinted.
Heat was in the very sod
which the saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure,
wealth or rank possessing,
ye who now will bless the poor
shall yourselves find blessing.

There's a tiny little sermon within this Christmas carol. Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me.

“Page and monarch, forth they went, / forth they went together / through the rude wind’s wild lament / and the bitter weather. / Sire, the night is darker now, / and the wind blows stronger. / Fails my heart, I know not how - / I can go no longer. / Mark my footsteps, my good page, / tread thou in them boldly: / Thou shalt find the winter’s rage / freeze thy blood less coldly. / In his master’s steps he trod, / where the snow lay dinted. / Heat was in the very sod / which the saint had printed. / Therefore, Christian men, be sure, / wealth or rank possessing, / ye who now will bless the poor / shall yourselves find blessing.”

We start with “deny themselves.” The page set aside his discomfort in order to do what was right by God. The story about Peter rebuking Christ immediately precedes Jesus’ teaching to the crowds which begins with “let them deny themselves,” precisely because Peter’s actions are an illustrative device. Peter isn’t so much chiding Jesus because he disagrees with him but because what Jesus has said makes him uncomfortable. What Jesus has said doesn’t match what he had envisioned or wanted. In this reading Jesus is not demanding starvation or deprivation of any kind. He is advocating that we stop pursuing what we want over against what God wants. How we think things should be is often not the same as how God thinks things should be.

How does denying ourselves lead to taking up a cross? Well, what did it mean for Jesus to take up his cross? Jesus taking up the cross meant not fighting with those who would call him an insolent rebel, those who were challenged and threatened by what he said and what he did. Taking up his cross meant accepting that his ways made others uncomfortable and angry, and not backing down for his own safety or to appease those others. If we are working on denying ourselves to aim for God’s will instead,

then taking up our cross means not apologizing or backing down when doing God's will makes others uncomfortable. It means committing ourselves to proudly being loud rebels to society's mores. Joseph D. Small, from the PC(USA) Office of Theology and Worship explains: "God is not conformed to human expectations or desires, for God is found in uncertainty, danger, and suffering...precisely where human wisdom perceives God's absence."¹ We join God in uncertainty, danger, and suffering when we take up a cross unapologetically.

So we've committed ourselves to working toward God's will and we've determined to be firm in our commitment – now we go out and do those things which seem so subversive to others. We follow Christ. The path experienced challenge and difficulty, so much that he didn't think he could go on. For us our fatigue and reticence are less frequently about physical discomfort and much more often about our psychic discomfort. We are plagued by fears – what Jesus did is scary stuff – approaching those whom others will not, not putting worth in stuff, trusting God for everything. I've recommended in a variety of settings the newest book by Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, and I offer her musings on fear from that book. She writes, "What if I could follow one of my great fears all the way to the edge of the abyss, take a breath, and keep going? Isn't there a chance of being surprised by what happens next?"² The terrain into which we follow Christ is oft rugged.

No one knew this better than those for whom this gospel was written. Persecutions abounded. Romans were still crucifying people for any sign of insurrection. And the early followers were becoming afraid and wondering if following this Jesus was worth it. Mark chose this teaching of Jesus to encourage those whose faith was flagging and whose fears were mounting. He offered the promise that all they endured was worth it for those who lose their life will save it. Those who go to the edge of the abyss and keep going will find it was worth it, will find blessing as the song goes. "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow Jesus. Individually, none of these are easy. How often do we forget God's will and so easily remember our own? How often would we rather back down before drawing attention to ourselves, before rocking the boat, before making a scene? And then to move beyond our fears and still push forward? I like to remind that nowhere in the Bible is it suggested that being the people of God is easy. It does say, however, that God will be with us – over and over, again and again. We aren't blazing our own trail; we're following Christ – and the more we follow him, the closer he seems to be. Of course, we are not alone because God is with us. But that's not all. We have

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 72.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, p. 75.

one another for the journey. Together, let us encourage each other as we deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Give us strength, courage, and hope to follow you, we pray. Amen.