

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

"Really?"

Second Sunday in Lent ~ Service of Healing & Wholeness

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Once there was a man who fell off a cliff. Halfway down the two hundred foot drop, he grabs a single, unsteady branch, and hanging there for dear life cries out for help. A voice from the other side of the hill replies, "Yes, my son." So the man cries, "Who are you?" And the voice answers, "I am God." So the man, encouraged by this says, "Help me!" And the voice replies, "Certainly." "What do I have to do?" asked the man, still clinging to the branch with all his might. The voice says, "Let go of the branch!" Then the man looks down, and looks up and pleads, "Is there anyone else up there?"

God, the only one up there, goes for long odds apparently. Like the Badgers on Thursday night, pulling the upset over the Purdue Boilermakers, who entered with a 23-4 overall record and were 12-2 in Big Ten play. And yet, the Badgers beat them 57-53, pulling it out in the second half. Exciting, thrilling... But small potatoes compared to the crazy long odds that God plays out in *both* of our scripture lessons today.

Like choosing ninety-nine year old Abraham and ninety-year old Sarah and promising them that they will be exceedingly fruitful, exceedingly numerous, the progenitors of a multitude of nations. Yes, this is the couple that God chose to be the two to carry forward God's original covenant with Noah (that we considered last Sunday). Our reading today stops short of the next verse, where Abraham's response to this crazy proposition is recorded graphically: (v. 17) "Then Abram fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" Or in today's vernacular, "Really?"

Yes, Our God goes for long odds. Like deciding to fulfill this covenant by actually *becoming* one human being, born to a poor couple in a backwater village about 1900 years later. And in today's story, this Word Made Flesh, human/divine being Jesus was heading to Caesarea Philippi, and "on the way" decided to prepare his disciples for the endgame. It was *not* the play-by-play game winning strategy that any one on earth would devise: Salvation by way of great suffering, rejection, and death? Peter would have none of that. Peter, Jesus' #1 draft pick for disciple. Peter was on the starting line up, he took Peter up the mountain the day he was transfigured. And it was Peter he would take to the Garden of Gethsemane. Mark writes that, "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. A more literal translation of the Greek word translated in the NRSV as "rebuke," is, "shut up." We aren't told exactly what all Peter said to Jesus, but it probably went something like, "This can't be it. You're the Messiah, for

God's sake. Great suffering? Rejection? Shut up! There's got to be a better way...Really!"

Today's scripture lessons lynch pins in our biblical story of salvation; open before us something very particular and local about God's ways, about "divine things," as Jesus puts it in our text. Something that I hope will be the takeaway for each of us on this February morning: God goes for the long odds. Our God of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Elijah, Jesus and Peter, this God, the only one up there, is betting on you and me to take a page from Jesus' playbook. Yes, now God is betting on you and me to carry the ball down the field. How? What's our strategy? We have it right here, as he laid it out for the crowd and the disciples. If you want to travel in the holy zone, if you want all your outside shots to be nothing but net, here is the 3-point play. This is the one that will save the world, one decision, one straw, at a time. Really.

I'm calling it today, the power of one. The power of one decision, one step, one person at a time, resetting their mind from human things to "divine things." Jesus did not sugar coat what this means or how to do it. It starts self-sacrifice and will involve great suffering. Right after the dust up with Peter Mark tells us, "He called the crowd with his disciples and then he laid it out plainly: "Deny yourself and take up *your* cross, and follow Jesus. The irony, the counterintuitive blessing that goes against our human things mind, is that this is the path toward healing, toward wholeness, yes toward joy. Easter joy begins here.

I was struck this week when I heard the story of Tara Westover, told in her memoir book titled, *Educated*. The story of her life in Utah with her six siblings, and her fundamentalist father and mother, living way off the grid, stockpiling a ten-year supply in preparation for either the end of the world, or a government takeover. They never went to a doctor, a hospital, or school. Her story of escaping this life and the slow, difficult, internal process that led her to leave her family eventually and go to Brigham Young University, Harvard, and earn a PhD at Cambridge is riveting as well as courageous. But what struck me about her story in the context of this sermon, was the pivotal role of her gutsy, self-denying brother Tyler. She explains that Tyler was the one who stepped up from being a bystander to becoming her advocate when she was in the depths of a free fall depression. She surmises that without Tyler she might not have survived. The power of one: one brother making one self-denying, cross bearing move. Of that moment when Tyler first reached out to her in the form of an email, she writes,

"I clicked the mouse, the attachment opened. I was so far removed from myself that I read the entire letter without understanding it: "Our parents are held down by chains of abuse, manipulation, and control.... They see change as dangerous and will exile anyone who asks for it. This is a perverted idea of family loyalty.... They claim faith, but this is not what the gospel teaches. Keep safe. We love you. " ... From Tyler's wife, Stefanie, I would learn the story of this letter, how in the days after my father had

threatened disownment, Tyler had gone to bed every night saying aloud to himself, over and over, “What am I supposed to do? She’s my sister.”

“Tyler paid a price for that letter, though the price is hard to define. He was not disowned, or at least his disownment was not permanent. Eventually he worked out a truce with my father, but their relationship may never be the same. I’ve apologized to Tyler more times than I can count for what I’ve cost him, but the words are awkwardly placed and I stumble over them. What is the proper arrangement of words? How do you craft an apology for weakening someone’s ties to his father, to his family? Perhaps there aren’t words for that. How do you thank a brother who refused to let you go, who seized your hand and wrenched you upward, just as you had decided to stop kicking and sink? There aren’t words for that, either.” [

She’s right. There aren’t words for that. There is a cross that stands for that kind of love. Divine Love, which God has planted in each of us. I hear Jesus calling us to reset our minds, like he told Peter to do, to reset our minds from human things to divine things. Jesus spells it out for Peter and the crowd quite plainly. It is a path that we may not like at first. It is a path that will not let us look away from the pain of the world. It is a path that leads us into the eye of the storm. Jesus’ way of love is counterintuitive. It disconcerts and disrupts everyone—Even Jesus, as he faced what lay ahead for him in Jerusalem.

I don’t think Peter was the only one that day on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, who did not like, did not understand Jesus’ prediction of his path forward. Nor is Peter the only one in our sanctuary today who does not like, does not understand the path that Jesus chose: A life of “downward mobility ending on the cross?”ⁱⁱⁱ A choice to loose one’s life for the sake of the gospel? Can this be the only path that leads to resurrection?

Jesus’ command to take up *your* cross means something different for each of us. However the turn to which we are all called can be summed up in one word. It’s really the only word you need to remember from this sermon. The one word is **decentering**. That’s right, making room for Jesus in the center; keeping the center clear for God in Christ. If Christ is in the center then we are not. Decentering is the path that leads to the healing path of salvation for each of us and for all of us. This is the key to living the Great Commandments to Love God and to Love our neighbor as ourselves. It was the hard lesson that Job learned through suffering and near death. It was the hard lesson that caused the man known as the “rich, young ruler,” to turn away from Jesus (Mark 10:17, Matt. 19:20, Luke 18:18). It was too much for him.

What about us? Decentering: It’s that simple and that complicated. If we want to be like Jesus, if we want to be more loving, if we want our community, our nation and our world to move toward justice and peace for all of God’s creation, if we want

what God wants, if in our hearts we are praying, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done”—then we have to move over.

If we believe, like Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, we are saying, “yes” to the daily challenge of decentering ourselves. We are saying, “yes” to doing our best to make the turn when we wake up each day and say to ourselves, “today is not about me, it’s about Christ.” If we want to be a Christian: We have to try to look at others as Christ does. We have to intentionally reset our minds from “human things” to “divine things.” We have to choose to suffer with, to have compassion for all who are in pain. Whether we like it or not.

The final point I want to make about Jesus’ invitation to “take up your cross” and follow him is this: because Jesus’ cross confronted systemic evil, in a very public way, to follow the way of Christ, to be true to the cross of Christ, Jesus is calling us to take an active role in civic or public life. To “take up our cross,” by definition, is not only about our personal salvation and relationships, but is also a clear call to political engagement. Like Peter, we may recoil at this. But if Christ is the Messiah we confess, the One who went to the cross to save and reconcile the world; if we want to follow Christ, we don’t have the choice. We cannot retreat behind the comfort of our church culture, or be content to simply babble within the bubble of people who think like we do.

We won’t get it right every time. Abraham didn’t. And yet, he and Sarah did live to become the progenitors of three great faiths: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Peter didn’t get it right every time, and yet he was forgiven, made whole, and became a great apostle, one of the rocks on which our church was built. I’m sure Tyler Westover didn’t get it right every time, but he did deny himself and reach out in compassion to save his sister, Tara at the very moment she needed him to. God is betting on us now. God goes for long odds. Praise be to God. Really!

ⁱ Westover, Tara. *Educated: A Memoir* (Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition), p. 317.

ⁱⁱ Henri J. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1989) pp. 81-82.