

Mark 8:31-38

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But 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." 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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 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."

“Signs of Life”

Last Friday I was a guest at Brith Kodesh a Reformed Jewish congregation near Twelve Corners in Rochester. Brith Kodesh annually hosts “Clergy Days” an event open to all area clergy and interested congregation members. Each year the Rabbis arrange for a speaker to lead the interfaith community in substantive dialogue. The congregation, Rabbis and staff also provided us with gracious hospitality and a delicious lunch. It was my first time in Brith Kodesh’s synagogue. Shortly after entering I realized the temple’s design and ambiance radiated with a theology of the goodness of life and the knowledge of God’s love. Every corner I turned held historic artifacts lovingly preserved by the faith community. Both ancient and modern artwork depicted God’s story with Israel throughout the ages. Different rooms and hallways had appropriate words from the Torah etched into stone, stitched on tapestries or painted on the wall like markers pointing toward God. Entering the room where the seminar took place a smile of joy crept across my face. The room was filled with natural light from window walls displaying gardens on two sides. On the front wall a massive collection of menorahs was displayed with the words “The Lord is my light” painted above. I was mesmerized! The synagogue had turned communal testimony written on the hearts of God’s people into a display for all to see. I considered all I took in signs of life, of God’s good word for us!

At home that evening I reflected on what I had witnessed. Behind the signs of life, I became cognizant of the fact that much of what I had taken in was a witness to God even amidst great pain and suffering. These testimonies of faith proclaimed that God’s saving hand and steadfast love brought the people through times of persecution and darkness. The holocaust, slavery in Egypt, the Babylonian exile and even the troubles in an individual’s life have eventually born witness to the triumph of life over death. At Brith Kodesh on Friday I felt like I was seeing what Abraham and Peter couldn’t yet see in their situations; the fidelity of God’s love believed and claimed in the best and worst of times.

Abraham laughed at God in our Old Testament lesson. Who can blame him? Can what has been “dried up” since a marriage began create new life? Mark portrays the disciples, especially Peter, as one of disbelief too. My favorite line in our story from Mark is this one, “He said all this quite openly.” Mark as narrator gives us a clue that Jesus’ words were the last thing the crowds or the disciples expected to hear. “He said *ALL THIS* quite openly.” This open proclamation of Jesus’ death was scandalous in

Peter's mind. That's why he took Jesus aside to reason with him. Peter confronts, head on, what we often wonder inwardly about when he rebuked Jesus. Can glory shine through suffering as a sign of life? Can there be a way of hope if we can't see it or comprehend it at this time?

Paul wrote to the Corinthians this instruction "we proclaim Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:23-25) That which we reckon now as foolish, could be God's way of showing us new life.

If we are to follow God's signs of life our own ideas of what is life giving will have to change. Soren Kierkegaard once said "Jesus' whole life on earth, from beginning to end, was destined solely to have followers and to make admirers impossible."ⁱ We worship the One who made a new way of life in the descent to death, transforming death into life forever. To follow Christ is to be set free from the bondage that daily tries to claim our minds, which are set on human things instead of God's things. The world believes that personal gain is wise and fulfilling. God declares worldly gain to be void of life. God insists that real life is found in the freedom of losing ourselves in God's loving embrace through faith.

God was busy making a way where there wasn't one, but Abraham and Peter don't know it. Covenant faithfulness is a sign of life, yet neither Abraham nor Sarah could believe it before it became true. How could bearing the burden of the cross be a sign of life? Peter didn't understand. If such pillars of faith seem clueless where do we come out in our understanding of God's will and ways?

The good news for us is that at some point, Abraham, Sarah and Peter, put their faith in God's desire to be in an ongoing relationship with them. They found that this relationship offered new life when they least expected it. They began to understand that God worked outside of what is rational. When they found a new way of life to be true and God's promises kept, they shared their story with others. Isaac was named laughter! We hear God's redemption in the allowance to laugh at our own disbelief. Peter claimed and preached forgiveness as one who denied and abandoned Jesus as we all do.

During Lent we proclaim the paradox that new life can stem from repentance. Repentance is not about shaming ourselves, but about truth telling and placing faith in God's forgiveness. Kathleen Norris tells a story about teaching parochial school children to write their own poetry based on the Psalms. She's found that children are often uninhibited in their emotional directness in writing and this practice offers them a way to work through their desires for vengeance. One little boy wrote his Psalm titled, "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'" Norris says that if the boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. The boy's imagination gave him a way to see that he could bring all his feelings of frustration before God and put them in their proper place.ⁱⁱ You could say he was willing to take up his cross in a powerful way by working his anger over the disappointing parts of his life.

This is what Jesus did for us. The cross was transformed to a sign of life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Self-denial means knowing only Christ, and no longer one’s self. It means seeing only Christ, who goes ahead of us, and no longer the path that is too difficult for us. Again, self-denial is saying only: He goes ahead of us; hold fast to him.”ⁱⁱⁱ God is ahead of us beckoning us forward to catch on to the transforming life we’ve been promised. Each cross we have to bear has already been tempered with God’s grace, love and promise to be with us always. We have to scurry to catch up with the Spirit’s beckoning call to discipleship. Stubbornness and lethargy set in often as we struggle to claim new life. Engage in the struggle! Pick up your cross and carry it. Better yet share it and proclaim what you are going through. Repent and believe that you can make it with God’s help. Your crosses and mine will be full of burden, but that burden will be transformed through grace. Amen.

ⁱ Wendell Berry, Dorothy L. Sayers, ... *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Plough Publishing House: USA, 2002) 55.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 49-50.