

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38
Psalm 22:22-30

The Second Sunday in Lent
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
February 28, 2021
The Rev. Karen Haig

Take Up Your Cross

It's been quite a week around our house. Things we thought were important caused some very real stress, like the fact that our yard has been torn up for over 4 months, like trying to figure out how to be fair in the face of unethical workers, like the inconvenience of water being shut off from our work studio, like the angst of having to leave the staff zoom happy hour because all of a sudden there was no water coming out of our faucets anywhere in the house, and all of that just when we thought it was about to get better. This is a lot to carry.

It's been quite a week for our community. Another cancer diagnosis, a difficult surgery that didn't go well, a recovery that should have been straightforward, another decision to enter hospice, a caregiver who has to have surgery herself and cannot begin to prepare herself because she cannot find care for the ones she constantly cares for, a beloved friend who just one week ago was working out harmonies for a song he would sing at a zoom birthday party later that night, but had a massive stroke instead. He died only days later. This is a lot to carry.

It's been quite a week out in the world too. Last night I was standing in my kitchen at 8:00, just starting dinner after much too long a day, when my phone rang. It was a number I didn't recognize, but still I picked up, only to hear the desperate voice of a young woman who was calling me from a domestic violence shelter in eastern Washington, hoping for some help with getting herself, her three suitcases and her two babies to the place she will be able to safely stay in Port Angeles. I listen to her story, I tell her I will make motel arrangements, that I will leave some money for the bus ride to PA at the motel for her, give her the phone numbers of the cab companies that can get her from the ferry to the motel. After calling me her guardian angel, after many tears and a profusion of gratitude, after listening to all the fear and the brokenness and sadness that needed to be told, I asked her, "How did you find me?" "I knew I needed a place to stay overnight and I didn't want to stay outside with my babies. So I called a church."

There I was, just standing at the stove, caramelizing onions in my warm, safe kitchen, talking with a spouse who loves me, who would never intentionally hurt me, and someone I didn't even know existed, who had been battered and beaten by her children's father calls me out of my isolation, out of my insulation, out of my comfortable evening and gives me the profound gift of being able to do something that will really matter, that will offer hope, that will allow for a warm supper and peaceful sleep at least one night.

I have come to understand that the isolation created by the pandemic we still find ourselves in hasn't just isolated us from the ones we love and long to be with. The pandemic has isolated us from a whole lot of suffering too. Oh, we see suffering in the papers and on the news, but that is

suffering we can keep at a distance and it isn't the same for me as listening to a real life flesh and blood young mother who is afraid for her life and the lives of her children. It isn't the same as entering into the suffering of a spouse who cannot be with or advocate for his beloved in the hospital. It isn't the same as coming alongside someone whose life was perfectly normal yesterday and is unfathomable today. "There is so much suffering" we say "it is too much to bear," and it is, if we try to bear it alone. And while the way we've had to live for the last year has left many of us feeling quite alone, we are not alone.

What does it mean to take up your cross?

I think most of us hear those words and think about the things we suffer. I cannot tell you how many times I've heard the words "it's my cross to bear," when someone is suffering and fresh out of ideas about how to make the suffering go away. Or when someone has a problem they simply don't want to unpack because it's too painful. Or when someone wants to justify oppression, violence or abuse. Some say that to take up their cross is to follow in Jesus' footsteps. But what does that mean? Does it mean living for love alone? Does it mean the walk to the cross? Does it mean suffering humiliation and beatings and injustice? Does it mean resurrection?

What does it mean to take up your cross?

It will help to understand the context in which Jesus spoke those words. The lectionary makers are at it again - last week we were back to the first chapter of Mark, this week we've jumped to chapter 8. Jesus has just had that conversation with Peter about who people say he is. When Jesus asked Peter who he says Jesus is, and Peter responded with the A+ answer "You are the Messiah," Jesus told them not to talk about it. And then he began to teach them what being the Messiah, the anointed one, really meant. You have to remember that in the first century Mediterranean world, the Messiah people expected was someone mighty and powerful like King David - someone who would come and rescue God's people by overthrowing everything that was not of God. But that wasn't what Jesus was teaching that day. Jesus taught them that to be the Messiah was to be fully human, which meant he would undergo great suffering and be rejected even by his own people. To be Messiah, meant he would die, and rise again.

We know the story ends in resurrection, but that's not where we're going today. Today, we're staying with suffering. Not suffering for the sake of suffering, or suffering as something inherently righteous, but suffering as a part of the human condition that we all experience, and that the God who loves us more than we could ever possibly imagine, chose to experience too.

I don't believe that God wills us to suffer, but we do suffer. And I think what Jesus is saying to us today, is that we need to participate in the suffering of the world. That sounds more bleak than it is, and still, we need to hear it. Jesus isn't asking us to wallow in suffering or to glorify suffering or to elevate suffering to something it isn't. We are human and because we are, we experience suffering. And in order to be fully human, as Jesus was fully human, we need to acknowledge

and fully experience our own suffering, as well as acknowledging, and coming alongside, the suffering and brokenness in the world.

This way of being isn't particularly popular in a culture where we look out for ourselves, get ahead at any cost, show the world what we're made of and how perfect we are. We live in a culture where how we look matters more than who we are. And looking imperfect, or broken, or as though we're unable to overcome our suffering on our own, isn't how most people want to appear. Being broken is not particularly attractive. It makes us look vulnerable. But that's just it. We are vulnerable and it is only in our vulnerability that we can have compassion for ourselves and for others. Stoic, certain, invincible people are not typically terribly compassionate. And still, we put on the brave face, act as if we've got everything under control and move along.

What does it mean to take up your cross?

When Jesus said those words, I don't think he was asking us to suffer as he was suffering. I think he was asking us not to look away – from the suffering or from the powers that cause the suffering. Jesus suffered and was killed at the hands of political and religious authorities who were threatened, and ultimately bested by his vulnerability. And God was right there in the middle of all of it because God is more present our suffering and vulnerability than most any place we will ever be. Where there is brokenness, we will find God.

There is a story some of you have heard me tell of Jesus walking along the shore and seeing someone way out in the water, flailing and struggling and seemingly drowning. Jesus immediately strips off his robe, dives into the water, swims out to the man, and drowns with him.

It's not the story we expect, but it is the story that is true. And I think that little story tells the meaning of the cross in a way most of us can understand. God does not will our suffering, but we are humans who suffer. We suffer because we're fallible, suffer because we live in bodies, suffer because we love deeply. And while our God is a God who wants abundant life for us, when God sees us suffering, God dives in and comes immediately to be with us in that suffering, showing us that there is no suffering, no brokenness God will turn away from. God will never, ever abandon us, especially in our suffering.

I think that must be something of what it means for us to take up our crosses – to recognize and move closer and closer and closer to the suffering of the world, so close in fact, that we cannot help but work to change the world. That's the last line of our St Barnabas mission statement, you know... *we commit to follow Christ, serve others, grow in faith and transform the world by sharing God's love.* May it be so. Amen.