

Jesus says some hard stuff this morning. He tells his friends that he will go up to Jerusalem, “submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive,”¹ and then, when Peter says’ “No way! This must never happen to you,” Jesus puts Peter on Satan’s team, and demotes him from the position of foundational rock to stumbling block.

Next, he tells us that if we want to go where he goes and join him in his mission, we will have to surrender our control, and let him be in charge. We will have to suffer with him. We will have to let him take us places we never dreamed possible. We will have to carry our own cross.

Our image of Jesus is challenged in this story. We want Jesus to comfort and protect us, not necessarily to actually let us share his life. We just want the good part. Well, of course! If you invite me to a feast and serve me a chocolate malted shake and lima beans, I’m going to guzzle the shake and shove the beans to the side!

The fact is, we need Jesus’ comfort. In other words, we need to know that he loves us no matter what. But this morning we learn that his love for us is bigger than just the good parts. His love for us is so big it includes the parts of our life we don’t like. It is has been said, and I forget by whom, that Jesus comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. So, where do we need comfort, and where do we need to be challenged? As we ask in Godly Play, what part of this story is about you?

What does it mean to lose my life for Jesus’ sake so that I may find it? For me, it has meant repeatedly learning the hard way that I am not capable of living up to the image I’ve created for myself. Which leads me to another question:

Did Jesus come to comfort us or to set us free? Freedom will change us. Comfort may not. To comfort someone might mean to tell them not to worry. It might mean giving them a little more of what they already have. It might mean

¹ Eugene Peterson, The Message, Mt. 16:21

assuring them that they will be just fine the way they are. But we know better. We know that deep down, we yearn to be set free from the tyranny of our own will. To be set free will change us. It won't change the people who frustrate, disappoint, or enrage us.

It seems that every time we enter a period of personal upheaval, our natural inclination is to try to diagnose the cause. *How* did I get here? *Why* am I here? What can I do to put things back the way they were? But, in times like these, maybe life has brought us to a place where it doesn't work to put things back the way they were. Too much else has changed. It also puts us in a place where we can empathize with the folks in Texas. It might not be possible to put everything back the way it was, but we want to do something. We want to help people get their lives back. We want to help them find shelter, clean up and rebuild. We can, and we should.

So, back to us. When too much has changed in our own lives to ever go back, we are faced with a new question: Now what? Where do I turn, now?

The truth is, no matter how much change we all go through throughout our lives, the essential gift of who we are remains constant. When we are true to who we really are, rather than attempt to become the person we think we need or want to be, we are on the threshold of our God-intended freedom.

But, this freedom comes with a cost. If we want it, we have to give up being in charge of ourselves and give that job to God. For example, when we go through times of deep sadness, or loss, or depression, or an enduring passage of frustration and impatience at the state of things, simply rearranging the stuff of our lives may not be all that's required. It's possible that life has led us into a time of renewal where we are being asked to let go of everything in order to reveal the adventure life is trying to get us to accept. This adventure isn't always about us taking charge and making it happen. The adventure Jesus is talking about is one that begins as soon as we are willing to surrender everything, and in a way, to give up and stop striving. "OK God, you get in the driver's seat now."

With Jesus in the driver's seat, do we really want to get in the car with him? I mean, is he a safe driver? Will I be OK? If he insists on choosing the destination and on being in charge of the GPS *and* the route we take, is that OK?

Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus' invitation to his disciples like this: "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; *I* am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"²

This doesn't mean that we have to go out from here this morning and look for a cross to bear or some suffering to endure. Don't worry. If you say "yes" to Jesus, suffering and the cross will find you well enough, and when they do, you will either run from it, fight it, or accept it. So, we have to be clear about what we really desire. Do we really want to join Jesus and go with him wherever he leads? Are we ready to accept the consequences and conditions of staying with him through thick and thin? If so, we will discover that taking up our cross is as simple as accepting and surrendering to the consequences of living life to the fullest, and finding our authentic self, and daring to do what we love, and letting joy finally flow through us.

² *ibid.* Mt. 16:24-26