

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus 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."*

Bearing our Crosses? - February 28, 2021

Mark 8:31-38

A very common, all too common way of dealing with people in crisis is to blame it on the Lord. How many times have we heard about someone in trouble only to hear another say, "Well, that must have been God's will." Someone gets sick with cancer, "God's will." Someone lost their job, "God's will." Someone gets in a car accident, again, "God's will." Insurance companies have a name for hurricanes and floods. They are classified as "Acts of God" aren't they?

I wonder what God must think of all this. I mean do we really believe that when bad things happen to us, God is why it happens?

I mean, if that is true, what does that tell us about the nature of God? If God is behind earthquakes and famines, and HIV and COVID-19, what kind of God is this? Is God some kind of merciless sadist who gets pleasure out of causing pain to human beings? Last week we talked about Noah in the aftermath of the great flood which was said to have wiped out all humanity. The Bible says that God caused that flood. The Bible says God destroyed God's own creation. In my opinion, that's pretty awful and the point of that passage is that God would never do that again. Forgiveness would be God's way from now on.

Other times in the Bible, God deliberately chooses to punish God's chosen people of Israel. God also went after the Egyptians, causing plagues and death.

Again I ask, what kind of God is this and why would we want anything to do with such a horrible, destructive God. Sure, we preach "God is Love" all the time in our church but it would seem that for every bit of love God supposedly shows us, there is an equal or even greater amount of hate. Does God really love us? Does God hate us? Is it somewhere in between?

Answering this question is quite important because if God is not purely love, then why are we here on this earth? Why are we spending our time giving God praise and worship? Do we attend church out of fear? Is God going to reach down from heaven and smite us for being the sinful creatures that indeed we are?

There are indeed many people who understand God to be some kind of judgmental, vengeful being who delights in making people suffer. Some do indeed worship this God out of fear and they waste no time making themselves judges. After all why should God have all the fun making people miserable and pulling them down?

On the other hand, there are also many who believe they, too, understand about God's vengeful judgmental ways and want nothing to do with such a God, or at least the churches that promote

and encourage such a view of God. They say with some justification, "Well, if that's your God, then I'm outta here."

In today's scripture, Jesus is quoted as speaking the familiar words, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." When you believe God is a God of judgement and revenge, out to destroy and punish, you might react, "I want nothing to do with this cross, I want nothing to do with this Jesus."

And you know something, if that is what God is about, I'd want nothing to do with him, too.

First let us make something very clear: if you are sick, if you are poor, if you are unemployed, if your relationships are falling apart, don't blame God.

If the world is on the verge of ecological collapse, if we are about to surrender ourselves to the control of dictators, if we're abandoning logic and truth only to replace it with whatever sounds convenient, don't blame God. If the world was destroyed in a flood, it might be easy to blame God, but the Bible also makes it clear that when the world goes crazy, God is not to blame, but human beings are. Humanity is its own worst enemy.

Back in the 1930s when penicillin was discovered, it was truly a miraculous cure. Nothing like it had ever existed. The bacteria of the day had no idea how to handle the power of penicillin and amazing cures occurred all the time. Bacteria was bad. Penicillin was good. End of story.

Except it wasn't. Over time, scientists began to realize that not all bacteria was bad. In fact while our bodies have bad bacteria which make us sick, we are also full of all kinds of good bacteria that keep us healthy. You've probably heard of pills called probiotics which are all about promoting the good bacteria as opposed to the antibiotics which are supposed to kill the bad bacteria. Unfortunately, many antibiotics don't care. They just kill all bacteria, good and bad.

So it is with so called "Acts of God." Rain is rain. Sometimes there's too much, sometimes there's not enough. Sometimes it's just right. We tend to think of hurricanes as disastrous events. However, without periodic hurricanes, the ecosystem of the Florida Everglades could not exist. Forest fires are considered bad. However, we now know they are necessary every so often to promote the health of the forests! In short, the cycle of nature, and even the rhythms of our bodies are not divided into neat categories of "good" and "bad."

This is why when we are afflicted by something terrible happening in our lives, it is a mistake to think them as the crosses we have to bear.

Unfortunately, much of Christian tradition has interpreted the tragic events of our lives as being sent from God as "Holy Tests" of how faithful we remain to the Lord. Those who complain, or just can't accept what has happened to them have been thought of not bearing their cross and actually

fighting God. Women have been encouraged to stay in abusive relationships. People have been urged not to seek treatment for their illnesses. Whole nations have been told to accept the evil of their ruler under the premise that all governments are sanctioned by God. I think you get the idea. But if you dig deep enough, is God really to blame for the terrible things that happen to us? Is it God? Or is it really society, or, yes, even ourselves personally?

Is, therefore, such passive acceptance of the negative side of life what Jesus meant by us bearing our crosses? Even the briefest examination of Jesus' life and ministry reveals that Jesus' understanding of bearing our crosses is very different from what many or even most believe.

So much of the popular view of Jesus revolves around imagining him as this wimpy, passive, inoffensive young man who didn't hurt anybody and for totally unknown reasons was condemned to death. Who could possibly hate Jesus? Who would want him to die? As a result, with this view of wimpy Jesus, he just went along with all the evil things the world did to him — and, by implication, so should we.

Is that really the case? When bad things happen to us, do we simply go along? Do we lie down and die? Do we never object to the unfairness in our lives? Do we never dare to complain to God because we are taught that God is deliberately making our lives bad?

The answer, of course, should be no. What is true is that Jesus did bear a cross, a cross he knew he would have to bear from the beginning of his ministry. What is also true is that as followers of Jesus, we also have had, do have, or will have our own personal crosses to bear.

The difference however between how many have viewed the idea of a personal cross and how Jesus viewed his understanding of his cross lies in understanding why we suffer — why we have to carry a cross.

Carrying your cross is not about patiently suffering and stolidly accepting whatever tragedy comes our way. If we get sick, we should fight our illness using whatever resources we have. If we are in a bad job or a bad relationship, we should do our best to get out of it as soon as we can. God is with us. God is there to help us, love us, and yes, get yelled at when we want to scream out our anger and frustration.

So what is the cross Jesus calls us to carry? The same cross he carried. Jesus was crucified not because he was nice. Jesus was crucified for the crime of trying to change the world.

What was Jesus for? First of all he was for everybody, but by his being for everybody, he made many enemies. Jesus improved the lives of everyone the establishment despised: women, foreigners, the hated Samaritans, the despised Roman occupiers.

Jesus welcomed those excluded from society: lepers, the blind, the deaf, people who were paralyzed, a woman who bled uncontrollably. In those days, if you had a chronic illness, people thought that you must have committed a terrible sin to invoke God's wrath. To people back then, it looked like Jesus was fighting God!

Jesus fed the hungry; he stood up for widows, orphans, and children. He frequently stated that in God's world, the first would be last, and the last would be first. He even stated that it would be almost impossible for the rich to enter heaven. In other words, Jesus told society that its priorities were all wrong. God was on the side of those society rejected so, of course, the establishment fought right back.

Jesus carried his cross, hung on his cross, and died on his cross because he dared speak out for justice, equality, and truth.

When we call ourselves followers of Jesus, it means we are embracing the same actions and words that he did. If we take Jesus' actions and words seriously, the crosses Jesus asks us to carry will get us into trouble too. Yes, the trouble we will get into is the "Good Trouble" — trouble urged by the late Congressman Rev. John Lewis. Nevertheless, when Jesus asks us to carry our cross, he is asking us to take all kinds of risks — risks that may well hurt us materially, or physically. Risks that may cost us our jobs or our partners or our families. Those are the kinds of crosses Jesus asks us to bear.

The question for us, for you and me, is what is or will be your cross? Perhaps Jesus is calling you to carry a cross to fight for racial equality. Perhaps your cross will be for promoting environmental justice. Perhaps your cross will be to insure all children can get a decent education. Have no doubt that bearing such crosses will get us into trouble with some people.

All these crosses are supported by and sanctioned by Jesus. They are all reflected in how he conducted his ministry and how he confronted the powers that be. Can we do any less?

When Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from taking up his cross and suffering and dying, Jesus angrily denounced Peter because Peter wanted Jesus to take the easy road.

But to change the world, Jesus knew he had to carry his cross, no matter where it lead. Will I? Will you? Will we?

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.