

Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

Our readings this morning are not the warm, fuzzy kind. They do not offer words of comfort nor do they necessarily inspire. Instead we are treated to sound advice from a scold: “If you’re smart, you’ll listen to me and take my advice,” seems to be the admonishment from Proverbs and “watch your mouth” seems to be an adequate summary from James. And then we have a less than attractive invitation to follow Jesus. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the opportunity to lose one’s life in order to gain it appears to be “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an engima.” It’s any wonder that Christianity gained a foothold in the first century and survived and thrived until now.

Perhaps its helpful to consider the community to whom Mark was providing this Gospel. These first century Christians were victims of the ruthless Roman Emperor Nero. They felt heavily the boot of Empire against their throats. Like their fellow Jews, they were systemically oppressed. They were no stranger to martyrdom and many willingly died for Christ and their faith. Still, the

instruction to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” would have been disturbing. Why would anyone on the wrong side of oppression be willing to deny themselves, much less be willing to give up his or her life? The answer seems to be a “no-brainer” - they wouldn’t. And yet they did. Whether we would is dependent on our own answer as to who Jesus is and our understanding as what that means.

Most, if not all of us, have been inculcated since childhood Sunday School to answer that Jesus is the Messiah. People that we trust, admire and respect told us it was true. We believe it, it says so in the Bible, that settles it. Over a the course of a life time, the implications of this acknowledgment becomes clearer. Peter didn’t have our advantage. He must have felt like the bright pupil in the class when he rightly stated that Jesus is the Messiah. How proud and full of affection for his dear friend Jesus must have been! “Yes,” he may have thought to himself, “he gets it, he sees it, he understands.”

Yet what Peter couldn’t fathom is why the Messiah must undergo great suffering. A triumphant leader doesn’t suffer. And

he loves Jesus. How painful it must have been to hear that a beloved friend predicts great suffering for himself and so Peter takes Jesus aside and rebuking him explains that Messiahs don't suffer, they overthrow the current order and rule in victory. A Messiah gives the Romans what's coming to them. And Jesus - well Jesus must have been deeply disappointed and hurt. His closest friend doesn't get it, his expectations haven't been met, and in the way that those close to one another often do when disappointed and hurt, Jesus responds harshly, "get behind me Satan!" And Peter must have been puzzled and hurt in return.

For the first time in Mark, we see Jesus explaining what he means to more than just his disciples. He is making a distinction between disciples - that is pupils, and followers. Followers are willing to embrace the way of the Messiah. Disciples may or may not be followers. Yes, the current order is going to be overthrown, but not in the way that Peter understands it. God fully entering into the human condition means being willing to and undergoing anything possible in human experience. Suffering seems to be a fact of all our lives, and God in Christ is willing to undergo the worst

sort of suffering at the point in time when God has incarnated into the human condition. God's choice is to restore all that He intended at Creation. And God's commandment to love our neighbor as lived out by Jesus means that to the best of our ability we respond to the suffering in the world around us. Ascension's own mission statement is that we respond to God's love and in our very corporate DNA we respond to the suffering we see in our immediate neighborhood.

While it is almost beyond imaging the type of suffering the early church endured, much less what those who died the agonizing, slow death on the cross endured, we do have some understanding of what it must mean to take up our cross and follow Christ. My Harper Collins Study Bible tells me that taking up our cross means "faithful endurance in the face of continuing trials." It can also mean a "bold, fresh expression of a church that is capable of responding to the suffering around us¹."

This community was a "bold, fresh expression of a church" when it was established with our founding rector Chuck Daugherty -

¹ Marsha Snuligan Haney, "Pastoral Perspective" FotW Year B vol 4 p 250.

the only Episcopal church created in the 20th Century in Southern Maryland. We were the body of Christ responsive to the needs of the military base in ways other area churches were not called to be. We were a “bold, fresh expression of a church” when we chose Rona Harding to be its rector. Women as pastors were still novel in the 1980s and unheard of in Southern Maryland. Ascension was a leader in Lexington Park in bringing Rona here to be our chief pastor. We already were a parish in service to our community through the pastoral care counseling center and Rona helped us be a “bold, fresh expression of a church,” with the establishment of the food pantry, and assisting in the creation of the HOPE Center and Three Oaks. Our response to the suffering around us only grew.

As a community we have been no stranger to suffering ourselves, and as the culture wars played around us we lost half our membership in 2003, yet Ascension “faithfully endured in the face of continuing trials.” The last six years have required faithful endurance as well, with the abrupt departure of a long time rector, with a dynamic interim rector, and the sudden death of our last rector - the other ministers - you - persevered. Our leadership

sought to engage with our nearest parish neighbors to solve common problems and participate in common ministry. Three of four parishes sought to see where our common life could be strengthened and have been meeting together for the last three years. St. George's and Ascension continue this walk together, striving to discover how we can again be the bold, fresh expression of a church into the 21st Century. Both parishes send representatives to a Discernment Committee to act as advisors to our respective Vestries. Next month I anticipate that each parish will actively engage as many members of our community as we can in being as clear eyed as possible about what our respective futures might be and where they might intersect. A variety of possibilities will be explored and tested. No doubt the discussions will be lively.

We will all have opinions, some strongly held, others not - we all will have desires and hopes, some may be met, others not. While no decisions are being made at this junction, it is very important that every voice that wants to be heard IS heard, that every need is uncovered and addressed if not met. The best way for the Vestry to make good decisions for our parish is to fully understand the hopes,

wants, wishes and dreams of those who call Ascension their spiritual home. The desires of the parish, coupled with our reality in this world and deeply anchored in a God who was willing to suffer as we suffer and to engage in the world as it is, will uncover what the Holy Spirit has in mind for us. It is difficult, painful work. Let us be mindful then of our Epistle and use our written and oral expressions during this time to bless God and each other. Let us pray for the patience to listen to and understand those with whom we may passionately disagree. Let us pray that we can heed the Wisdom offered to us in Proverbs. Let us be steady in the practice of our faith. Let us be confident that we can find the way to be the bold, fresh expression of a church that addresses the needs today's suffering world. It is in our heritage. May we too, continue to be passionate followers of Christ.

Amen.