

LENT 2

READING:

31 Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead. 32 As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things.

33 Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. "Get away from me, Satan!" he said. "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

34 Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. 35 If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. 36 And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? 37 Is anything worth more than your soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Mark 8:31-38

REFLECTION:

Jesus leaves the wilderness and begins his ministry. He starts calling his disciples to join him and weaves his way through rural Palestine. He catches the attention of the masses, who follow him, listening and seeking miracles and healing. He also has growing interactions with the elders, leading priests, and teachers of religious law. They are becoming more baffled and incensed by the claims he's making, the miracles he's performing, and his utter disregard for their stature and status.

Time and again, as Jesus performs these miracles, he implores the recipients of his healing to keep quiet about what has happened. He instructs demons not to call out his name. And while he withdraws to rest at various times, he is relentless in his message and in meeting people; as he puts, "Let's keep going to other places to preach there too - that is why I have come."

I imagine this is beginning to look a lot more like the momentum a Messiah would have, if one were coming to save God's people. While not growing in popularity amongst the religious elite, the masses were hungry for Jesus wherever he went. And yet, questions surrounding who he really was abounded. Is he Elijah, re-incarnated? Is he the recently deceased John the Baptist, miraculously raised from the dead? Who do people say I am? But Peter has the answer! "You are the Christ!". Peter, the brash, the impatient, the most ardent of Christ's disciples.

So when Jesus begins to talk about his suffering and death, Peter steps in to give him a pep talk. For Jesus, his purpose is the tireless pursuit of people understanding the profound desire of Yahweh to be reconciled to humankind once and for all. He wants them to understand that the waiting for a Messiah is over. God is fulfilling his covenant to his people through him. And not only his chosen people, but all people, just as God intended from the dawn of time. Christ's message is relentless and his gaze is completely fixed on moving towards the cross.

For Peter, this is baffling and ridiculous. Why would the Christ, who has finally arrived to save us, have to go through all of that? Jesus, what you're saying is backwards and certainly can't be part of any remotely successful ministry/growth plan. The successful don't suffer and then literally get crucified. The successful build on this momentum and go on to grow a powerful political/religious machine that changes lives and empires. Surely that's why you're training us up: to help you lead and grow this thing.

Peter receives the harshest rebuke Christ has for any of his followers - get away from me, Satan. Your intentions might be all good in growing my kingdom but you have no idea what it's going to be like. You want to gain in life? Well, my friend, true life comes at a steep price - your own life - your ambitions for yourself, your dreams for your children, your well intentioned plans, your checked boxes. But if you give that all up for my sake, you will gain life. It will be nothing like you imagined...and quite possibly, from the outside looking in, it won't look like much of a life that you'd want by this world's standards. But I promise you, there is nothing more precious than your soul...and your soul will be saved; your soul will be filled to overflowing.

I don't know what losing our lives looks like today. The disciples really did leave behind their former ways of life to follow Christ and then after his death, to continue spreading his Word. I can't speak for anyone else but myself. Losing my life has been putting aside a career, dreams of financial security and success, trips for my family, and long ago, a bigger house, a nice car, and a better neighborhood. While I wanted all these things, I also always had a niggling feeling deep inside me that, while perhaps all of the above aren't inherently wrong or bad, they might not end up satisfying...well, the niggling feeling. And through a slow process of losing that life, I have begun to experience something different; something that I can only best describe at times as being totally and completely set free. None of it is easy and it has been at times, incredibly painful, hard, and kind of upside downish; both the process of losing the former life and of gaining the new life. It's this ongoing tension of being both a yoke but an easy one; a burden, but a light one. And I wonder if this life he's leading us into perhaps isn't better suited for someone with more faith, not prone to asking God everyday, "Really? How can I be certain, God, that you're actually in all of this and that Colin and I aren't just delusional because this doesn't seem like a solid business plan, retirement plan, or an effective way for people to find Jesus using us self-centred underperformers!" And in the same breath, gratitude overflows because this is also a way more fulfilling life than anything we could have come up with on our own.

CHALLENGE:

I wonder if what makes these verses so difficult for us is that we have so much to lose and so little to gain. It is very hard for us to believe there is anything better than fulfilling our dreams, being productive and successful, being healthy and comfortable. For us, this suits us perfectly as the foundation for our life and testimony, just as it did for Peter when he tried to bring Jesus to his senses and stop him from talking about all that nonsense regarding suffering and dying. But I think the challenge becomes one of shifting our attention and our energy off of ourselves and our lives, and unrelentingly onto Christ; trusting and committing in faith that whatever happens in the losing and gaining of life, it will be completely and utterly worth it.



PRAYER:

God, we love you. But, we also really love our lives. And it's really hard for us to imagine that there is any benefit to losing it and trading it in for the unknown. That doesn't seem logical or even wise. We get where Peter was coming from. So help us God...we will desperately need your help if we are to take Jesus at his word in these verses. This is not something that comes naturally or easily for us. Plus, people might think we're nuts. Help us, God. Be patient with us.