

2.25.2024 Lent 2

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

“Hoping against hope, we believe”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

I am always very grateful for Peter because Peter got things so spectacularly wrong. In today's gospel, Jesus had just told the disciples plainly that he would undergo great suffering, rejection and be killed, and he told them of his resurrection. Jesus had said all of this to prepare his disciples for what was ahead of them, yet Peter wanted to say, “No, Lord, not you; it can't be so!” Peter placed all his hopes not on Jesus' cross and resurrection, but on a future of his own planning.

This was the beginning of Peter's eventual denial of Jesus. Perhaps Peter wanted Jesus to become a more popular spiritual leader, or perhaps even a political leader who could take up arms against the Roman Empire. Like someone playing kingmaker and saying, “I have plans for you,” Peter could not yet follow Jesus in discipleship.

Jesus rebuked Peter in the harshest manner possible, saying, “*Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*” Peter's rejection of Jesus' cross and suffering was as rejection of God's plans for Jesus. So, Jesus again spoke plainly, saying, “*If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*”

These words are the very center of discipleship to Jesus. These words are also difficult because we often refuse, like Peter, to set our minds upon divine things. We have other plans and hopes for Jesus that often involve all manner of things. We deny others in Jesus' name, yet we never seem to be able to deny ourselves of anything. Our plans for Jesus frequently involve politics, economics, and social agendas of all forms. We turn faith into easy agreement about printed words rather than discipleship to Jesus. To rephrase an old saying, “We put the cart before the Lord.”

Jesus' words “to deny yourself” mean to repudiate yourself, renounce yourself, abandon yourself, and forget yourself. Yet we never seem to be able to deny, renounce, or forget ourselves. Instead, we extend grace upon grace to ourselves, while denying God's plan for this world that God so loves. We set our minds upon the penultimate and human things of this world rather than upon God's ultimate promise of love for our neighbor and for all nations.

We set our minds not upon divine things but upon human things: success, public opinion, and upon leaders who promise that we will gain the world if we follow them. Jesus says to us as well, “*For*

*what will it profit one to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can one give in return for their life?"* Jesus' words about self-denial, the cross, and discipleship point the way for us to regain and rediscover our lives.

In a book titled, *The Imitation of Christ*, medieval theologian Thomas à Kempis (c.1380-1471) described humanity's difficulty in denying ourselves. His words still sound quite contemporary,

Jesus has many who love His Kingdom of Heaven, but few who will carry His Cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feasts, but few His fasting. Many want to rejoice with Him, but few will stay by Him. Many want to follow Jesus to the breaking of the bread, but few will drink the cup of His suffering. Many admire His miracles, but few follow Him to the shame of the Cross. Many love Jesus as long as no hardship touches them.

We choose to follow others rather than he who calls us to new life. We choose to follow the crowd, not rocking the boat, and so we resist letting go and fully believing in God's promise of grace. We are often afraid, win or lose, to place all our hope upon Jesus.

The self-abandonment that Jesus calls us to is faith in God that is free from self-love, self-interest, and self-centeredness. It is faith that is free from judging others and holding prejudice against others. To deny yourself is to say before God, "Chief of sinners though I be, Lord, have mercy upon me." To deny yourself means sharing in Christ's suffering; it means the less quarter you give yourself before God, the more God's grace will be at work upon you.

Today's readings about Abraham and Sarah remind us of their self-denial and their faith in God's promise. Paul described this as "*hoping against hope and believing.*" To hope against hope is to let go of all the little hopes and desires we have in this world and place our greatest Hope (capital "H" hope) upon God's grace.

Though Abraham and Sarah were both advanced in years and had no reason to hope that they would give rise to many nations, they denied themselves and believed God's promise of many nations. To others, it may have seemed irrational, but they hoped, believed, and abandoned themselves into God's future without being able to see that future. They believed in grace without being able to see, taste, or touch that grace, and so God reckoned them as righteous because they trusted in the promise that through them many would come to believe and know God's love.

I think can perhaps understand in some very small way Abraham and Sarah's faith in becoming the ancestors of many. As a pastor and teacher in Japan, I learned the word "*oshie-go*" (教え子) which means that a student becomes a "child of the teacher." Over the years, I taught hundreds of students and as well as laying hands upon many seminarians ordaining them as pastors. I am not boasting,

quite the contrary, I am simply saying that for a brief moment I was able in some small way to believe in God's promise and future in the lives of others. This is what we do as we abandon ourselves to help others. Hoping against hope, we believe that God is at work through us in the futures of others that we will never fully see or know.

Yet we are surrounded by people who seek to control God's narrative of the world, deciding who is in and who is out. We are surrounded by people who abandon and deny everything and everyone except themselves. We are surrounded in this world by a great many modern Peters who would like to play kingmaker with God and who seem solely concerned with their own wealth, fame, and power over others.

If you do nothing else today, please take some time to pause and give thanks for someone in your life who believing in the future abandoned themselves to help you. Take time to give thanks for someone who embodied a hope in God so great that they seemed to become less and less as God grew greater and greater in them.

To hope against hope and believe is to know a grace so powerful that we can abandon our lives into God's future. The less quarter you give yourself before God, the more God's grace will dwell in you. The more quarter you give to others with love and forgiveness, the more that you place the future into God's hands.

Hope and believe as if everything depended upon God and live as if, in everything, God is working through you. Amen.