

## **Lent 2B, 2021**

### **Gains and Losses**

Mark 8: 31-38

*By Debie Thomas*

Thank goodness for the disciple Peter. Honest, earnest, bumbling Peter, who boldly says the foolish things I wish I could say, too. If it weren't for the Peters of the Bible, I'd feel inadequate and inept most of the time. Mercifully, Peter reminds me that we're all inadequate and inept most of the time. We're not saved by our ingenuity. We're saved by God's grace.

In this week's Gospel reading from St. Mark, Jesus predicts his death for the first time. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering," Jesus tells his disciples. He must "be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

Standing on this side of resurrection history, we too easily miss the bombshell effect these words have on Jesus's disciples. Their great hope, cultivated over the three years they follow Jesus, is that he will lead them in a military revolution and overthrow their Roman oppressors. After all, they've seen him feed the multitudes, heal the sick, clear the temple, and raise the dead. They've witnessed firsthand his charismatic ability to draw crowds. They've heard him proclaim the arrival of a new and glorious kingdom that will never end and never fail.

In other words, he is their longed-for future and their cherished dream. So what can be more disorienting, more ludicrous, than the news that their would-be champion is determined to walk into a death trap? To surrender without a fight to a common criminal's death?

Cue Peter, who takes Jesus aside and scolds him for being too macabre. Too fatalistic. Too un-Messiah-ish. How dare the "good news" hero speak such gruesome bad news? How dare he choose a path contrary to his followers' expectations?

You know the rest of the story. Jesus, in what might be the sharpest and most stunning rebuke in all of Scripture, puts Peter in his place with one swift stroke: "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus turns to the crowds and captures the essence of his message in two sentences: "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."

I don't know about you, but my sympathies are with Peter. After all, he means so well. He cares so much. Lest we forget, he has lived his entire life under the cruel yoke of the Roman Empire. He has seen torture and death. He has walked past rows of Roman crosses. He knows what "justice" under colonialism looks like. Haven't the children of God experienced enough hardship? Isn't it time to do battle? To win? Why is Jesus preparing his followers for more pain and loss instead?

Maybe, given our own context of Covid, social distancing, and daily death tolls, Peter's rebuke feels especially poignant. Haven't we had enough of suffering? Enough of loss and grief and fear and loneliness? Isn't a second Lenten season in the shadow of pandemic grim enough? Why is Jesus still inviting us to die in order to live, and lose in order to save?

One temptation at this point is to minimize. "I'll give up dessert for Lent," I say. Or deny myself Facebook and Youtube for a few weeks. I'll pray more, study more, tithe more, volunteer more. All good and necessary things, no doubt. But not, I think, what Jesus means when he invites the crowds to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. Not what he rebukes in the strongest possible terms when Peter tries to replace Jesus's cross with a shortcut.

The other temptation is to maximize in the wrong direction. To become, as the expression goes, "so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good." This is the kind of self-denial that strips life of all pleasure, all embodiment, all celebration, all joy. The single-mindedness that reduces the world to a grim mission field, a landscape to conquer with an earnest but ultimately loveless zeal. It is the dangerous kind of self-denial that encourages people to stay in abusive relationships, or make foolish financial decisions, or in other ways perpetuate their own victimhood. I don't believe that this is what Jesus means, either. I can't recognize such austerity in the Jesus who plays with children, the Jesus who turns water into wine, the Jesus who advocates for the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, and the outcast.

So what then? What does it mean to deny myself? How shall I save my life by losing it for Jesus's sake in 21st century America?

Here's one possibility: Might I begin by acknowledging that I live in such crippling fear of suffering and death that I use up a huge amount of my mental, spiritual, and physical energy each day trying to stave off both? To be fair, contemporary western culture encourages me to do this. What would Jesus say, I wonder, to the multi-million-dollar industries that invite me to deny my mortality through cosmetics, fashion, leisure, sex, entertainment, real estate, sports cars, weight loss, beauty? What would he say to a culture that glorifies violence but cheapens death? A culture that encourages rugged individualism and "freedom" at the expense of self-giving compassion and empathy? What would he say to my own frightened heart, that prioritizes self-protection over so much else that matters in this life?

What if Jesus's call is for us to stop clutching at this life so desperately? To step out of the vicious cycles of denial, acquisition, terror, and violence that seek to cheat death, but in fact rob us of the abundant life Jesus comes to give us?

To take up a cross as Jesus did is to stand in the center of the world's pain. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us, and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain — no matter what it costs.

How shall I die in order to live? How shall I lose in order to save? Maybe by accepting — against all the lies of my culture — that I will die, and trusting in Jesus's assurance that I will also rise again. Maybe by learning what Peter has to learn -- that the way up is down, that the path to victory begins with surrender, that Jesus's version of heroism is steeped in humility.

As we move deeper into Lent, shall we protect ourselves with numbness and apathy, or experience the abundant life Jesus offers to those who ache, weep, and bleed alongside the world's suffering? This is the question I'm asking in my Lenten wilderness: how shall I die?