

Rev. Shannon Kershner  
March 8, 2009  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Mark 8:27-35

### Take Up Your Cross?<sup>i</sup>

There was nothing religious about the cross. In the time when Jesus and Peter lived, the cross had no veneer of redemption, no hint of life, no connection with the divine. There was absolutely nothing religious about the cross.

Rather, there was only one purpose for a cross in the time of the Roman empire—the purpose of execution. The cross was both the symbol and the means of political and military punishment for dissidents and criminals. It was Rome’s version of the electric chair or the strap-covered gurney sitting by the lethal injection machine. No, the cross had no veneer of redemption, no hint of life, and absolutely no connection with the divine. It was an instrument of suffering and death for those hung upon it, as well as an instrument of fear and intimidation for everyone else.

It was not uncommon for the road to Jerusalem to be lined with crosses, each one of them bearing a body<sup>ii</sup>. Clearly, the cross-lined road was meant to scare the daylight out of everyone—children and adults alike—everyone who passed by that place of public execution as they went from their home to the market, or from the market to Temple, or over to the house of a loved one for a visit. You could not escape their looming shadows as the sun rose on a new day or as it set behind the horizon. You wonder if it felt like having to walk through the death house at Huntsville State prison day after day after day.

After a while, that kind of constant noise and pressure of fear and intimidation takes its toll on your spirit. Having to walk down a road lined with crosses takes its toll on your ability to fully live, or to fully love, or to fully hope. I guess you might get to a point where you don’t even really see them anymore, because you have become so numb to their presence. Perhaps if you grow up seeing the cross, after a while, it is as if you stop really seeing it and subconsciously block it out as mere distraction. And then before you know it, you and your friends are singing and laughing as you walk down the road lined with crosses and slow death.

I wonder if Jesus himself struggled as he walked down that road. He also would have seen them his whole life, starting in his childhood. So I wonder if he wrestled with the temptation of avoidance. If, as a teenager, he simply stopped looking up as he made his way to Jerusalem. Perhaps he, too, found himself trying to not notice the pain and the fear proclaimed by the crosses that lined the road. Because if you ever let yourself stop and look, you would inevitably hear the empire’s announcement of its power over your life.

For that is what each cross was doing as it stood there—it was preaching a sermon of the empire. “Look and see,” the cross would proclaim, “Look and see what holds your life and your death. Look and see and learn under whose power and reign you live.” Perhaps even Jesus found himself trying to ignore all the little sermons of the empire that were being preached to him and to his people day after day after day.

Certainly Peter found himself in that situation. All those sermons of the empire indoctrinated his spirit with fear and struggle. That fear and struggle show clearly throughout this entire exchange with Jesus in today's reading. We first glimpse Peter's struggle when Jesus asks the disciples about his identity. "Who do people say that I am?" In response, they give Jesus the answers they were hearing on the streets—rumors that he was John the Baptist come back to life, or Elijah the prophet, or just another powerful prophet who had emerged.

But none of those answers satisfied Jesus. In truth, he did not just want to know what they were hearing about him. Rather, he wanted to know what they, themselves, were starting to believe about him. Jesus wanted to know what they, themselves, had decided after months and months of listening to Jesus' sermons that he proclaimed in both word and deed. Sermons of life that offered a countertestimony to the empire's sermons of death. Had the disciples heard anything different than what those crosses proclaimed about who and whose they were? Or did fear and death still dominate their spirits? "Who do YOU say that I am," Jesus asked them, point-blank.

"You are the Messiah, the Christ." Peter spoke without hesitation. Now, whereas the Gospel of Matthew records Jesus praising Peter for this insight, this Gospel of Mark shows us no such interaction. Rather, Jesus responds with a stern admonition not to tell anyone about that reality. And we have to wonder why that is. Why didn't Jesus rejoice that Peter had finally heard some of Jesus' sermons of life? Why didn't Jesus throw a party for Peter and the disciples, shouting "Yea! You finally get it!" Why did Jesus respond sternly to Peter's confession of faith and tell them all to keep silent about it?

Perhaps Jesus' stern admonition was a reaction to what Messiah /Christ might have implied for Peter. Because the title Messiah, or "anointed one," had a long history with the people Israel. It was commonly believed that the Messiah would be the one who would finally politically triumph over the Romans and restore the collective honor of Israel.

In other words, perhaps when Peter declared that Jesus was the long-awaited-for Messiah, he was also declaring his firm belief that through Jesus, Rome was finally going to get what was coming to them. Perhaps Peter was making his own countertestimony against the empire—his sincere hope that when all the dust of battle had settled, the revolutionary leader Jesus would have finally put Israel back in power where it belonged. Perhaps the subtext under Peter's confession of Jesus as Christ was his desire for the day when all those crosses that lined that road to Jerusalem would hold Roman leaders, for a change. Then, all would see who **really** held the power of life and of death—Peter and his people.

I cannot help but wonder if those desires undergirded Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah. Because immediately after Jesus admonished Peter, he quickly began trying to reframe how he was being the Messiah. He immediately began telling Peter and the others that it was not going to go how they expected it to go. He was not going to do what they expected him to do. There would be no battle. There would be no political victory. There would be no attempt at redemptive violence. There would be no replacements of the bodies on the crosses. Well, at least no large-scale systematic replacement.

Instead, Jesus told them that he was going to be rejected, and suffer, and end up on the cross himself. It was inevitable. His ministry of life was too threatening to the powers of death. His countertestimony against the empire was too dangerous for those in charge. They would have to kill him. That is what the powers do when someone so radically threatens the way things are. And Jesus knew it. And so he told them.

Jesus was going to join all of those other people whose own lives had ended in violence and with public humiliation. But then, Jesus went on to explain that his death would not be forever, that God would raise him to new life to show the powerlessness of fear and death; but by that point in the sermon, no one was listening to Jesus anymore. Especially not Peter. Peter stopped listening as soon as he heard the words “be killed.” It did not make any sense to him. What good was a dead Messiah? That was impossible to fathom. And he could not stop himself from saying so.

Peter took Jesus aside and tried to rebuke him, to set Jesus straight. Had Jesus lost his mind? Why on earth would he say that he was going to end up on one of those horrible crosses? Because if something like that could happen to Jesus, to the Messiah, then it could happen to any of them<sup>iii</sup>. And none of them signed up for defeat. None of them signed up for rejection. None of them signed up for suffering. None of them signed up for death. They signed up for victory, for success, for power. They signed up to be the ones who dictated who was on the cross. They signed up so it would never be them again. Jesus needed to get it straight.

But Jesus responded to Peter just as intensely. “Get behind me Satan!” And with his words our minds are driven back to the wilderness, to the time when, after his baptism, Jesus wrestled with the tempter. Wrestled over who he was as Son of God, as Emmanuel. Wrestled over how he was going to go about his ministry and his life. Wrestled over how vulnerable or invulnerable he was going to be. Wrestled over how little or how much power he would exert on his own behalf. Jesus’ use of the title “Satan” to Peter signals that as Peter spoke, Jesus heard clearly the slithering sounds of a different voice trying once again to gain control.

So Mark tells us Jesus decided right then and there to assert his countertestimony of life and gospel once again. He turned not only to his disciples, but to the entire crowd and put it all out there. No more secrecy. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, 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.”

And all those who heard his words must have had the same reaction as Peter did. They stopped listening as soon as Jesus said “cross.” For all of them had lived their lives walking down that Jerusalem road. All of them had lived their lives trying to forget the empires’ testimony that fear and death were the only powers that could define them. All of them had had to respond to their children the first time those little voices asked why those people were up there and if that was going to happen to them, too. And now this One whom they had grown to trust was telling them to deny themselves and to take up a cross?

What was that supposed to mean? The cross was the tool of the empire. The ultimate expression of power over. There was nothing religious about the cross at that time. There was no veneer of redemption, no hint of life, no connection with the divine. They had lived their lives under the

shadows of those crosses, trying with all their might to not look up, constantly living with the pressure of those slithering voices that kept proclaiming to them under whose power they lived, under whose reign they existed.

But now Jesus, this one whom they loved, this Jesus was telling them to stop giving the fear of the cross so much power. To stop letting death determine their every move. To stop letting the empire's threat have the last word on whose they were and under whose reign they lived. "Take up your cross," Jesus said, "and stop worshipping fear and death as your gods. Take up your cross and **follow me**. Take up that horrible cross as a sign that you believe in the life-giving power of God more than you believe in death-dealing power of fear.

Take up that cross and see for yourselves the empty threat that it represents. For God is the one who holds your life, not the empire. God is the one who will walk with you through death, not the empire. God is the one who will give you new life, not the empire. God is the one under whose reign and under whose power you live and move and have your being, not the empire—not the economy, not your addiction, not your wealth, not your poverty, not your security, not your status and not even your family.

We are called to take up our cross, follow Jesus, and show those slithering voices of death and fear, once and for all, who and whose we truly are. But when we do, we must make sure our eyes are wide open. For carrying that cross and being a disciple will not be easy, and the road will not be smooth. As a matter of fact, following Jesus will slowly burn away who we have been and it will also kill our delusion of being the center of all things. But, if we can summon up our courage to take up that cross and follow, one foot in front of another, Jesus promises us we will slowly find our life. A life that begins, ends, and begins again in the light of his care and reign, and not in the captive shadow of empire.

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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to different sources for this sermon: My own theological wrestling match with the doctrine of atonement and feminist/womanist contributions to that dialogue; Walter Wink's theology of the principalities and powers, as well as his helpful articulation of the myth of redemptive violence; Bruggemann's language of countertestimony; Ched Myers' excellent book on the Gospel of Mark titled Binding the Strong Man.

<sup>ii</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. God in Pain. Ed: Ronald Allen. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p.59.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.