

St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Second Sunday in Lent
March 16, AD 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Mark 8:31-35

³¹ **He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.** ³² **He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.**

³³ **But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."**

³⁴ **Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** ³⁵ **For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. (NIV)**

The Way of the Cross and No Other Way

Picture this: you've begun following and supporting a unique man. He's kind and tender, but at the same time tough and firm. There's something about what he says that resonates deep within you. You believe in him. You're convinced that this man can really make some positive changes in the world. You give him your support and your loyalty. You have a sense that if you stick with him, all the hard work will pay off someday.

One day he calls you and all his other followers together. He has an announcement to make. "Listen up, people! The time has come. I'm making my move. It's time to get this show on the road." You listen excitedly. "Here's the plan," he continues. "The most influential leaders in our world—I'm going to systematically tick them off, make them really mad. Once they get a taste of me they're gonna spit me out. Then, after that, next stop: execution! I'm gonna get myself killed! Don't worry, though. After three days I'll be alive again. So, that's the plan. Who's with me?"

"He's lost it," you think. Your heart sinks. "Somebody's got to do something. He's going to get himself hurt." You think for a moment. "He's going to get *us* hurt! Somebody has to say something."

Somebody is. Your friend Peter is getting up. Thank goodness! Peter is always ready to say something. He'll straighten the Master out. Peter puts his arm around the Master's shoulder, takes him aside and begins to set him straight.

But suddenly the Master wheels around and looks straight at Peter, holding a thick hand in front of his face. "Get behind me, Satan!" he says. "You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men."

Can you picture yourself there with Jesus that day? It was all very strange. Jesus' ministry was going well. Then he began talking about suffering and being rejected and about dying! But why?

Jesus knew why. He knew that of all the ways of going about his work, there was only one way to carry it out to perfection. It was the way of the cross and no other way.

The way of the cross and no other way—that was true for Jesus and it's true for us, too.

No other way for Jesus

Last week we heard about Jesus bursting onto the scene. "The time has come!" he proclaimed. "The kingdom of God is here!" The kingdom of God is here. God was at work in the world, through Jesus reconquering territory that was rightfully his—human hearts and lives.

If you follow Jesus through the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, you see Jesus doing things to back up his proclamation that the kingdom of God had arrived. He throws demons out of people. He miraculously feeds thousands of people. He heals the sick, reversing the effects that sin has had on their bodies. In fact, just before we get to Jesus in Mark 8, we find him healing a blind man, restoring his sight. It's no wonder, then, that Peter says to Jesus on behalf of all the disciples, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It makes sense.

But then Jesus says something that hits his disciples like a ton of bricks. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this...

Here's the revolutionary leader, the one who appears to be capable of bringing real change into a broken world. And now he says that his plan is to suffer? To be rejected? To be killed? It sounds crazy. It's no wonder, then, that Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to scold him. It makes sense.

But does Jesus consider it sensible—what Peter is doing? Um, no. Jesus considers it satanic! "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

God had a plan. He had had one for eons. Remember Genesis, when Adam and Eve fell into sin and made the whole human race guilty to God and friends of the devil? God had promised to send someone into the world to crush the head of the devil, the great serpent. But as this person was crushing the head of the devil, remember what would happen to his heel? It would be struck. Jesus would suffer as he defeated Satan.

Or remember the Passover, the special meal the Jews celebrated starting at the time of Moses? It featured a spotless lamb who would save God's people from death. But remember in the original Passover what would happen to that lamb? It would be slaughtered, its blood painted on the doorframe of the house. Jesus was that Lamb of God. He saves people from death by letting his blood be shed.

Why suffer? Not because he had to to pay for things he had done. No, it was for us. God's plan was for Jesus to suffer and die to pay for all the sins that we would do, all the sins of the world, in fact. Jesus' suffering and dying as our substitute was the only way to release us from the death of our sins. The only way to make sure we would be

free from the hell our sins deserved was to suffer it himself. That's what he did when he went the way of the cross.

That's probably not the plan we would have come up with. But that's the plan God made, and Jesus was intent on carrying it out. He wouldn't let anything stop him.

See how much Jesus loves you! Instead of wriggling out of suffering and dying, he did it. Instead of looking for another option, a less painful one, he went the way of the cross for you. He let the punishment of your sins fall on him so it wouldn't fall on you.

No other way for you and me

As if this proclamation about his suffering and death weren't enough, Jesus continues. He tells his disciples that he wasn't going to be the only one going the way of the cross. Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Now we should be clear about something. Jesus was not saying that after he died on a cross all his disciples were going to die on crosses, too, as if Jesus paid for some sins with his death but his disciples had to pay for more. No, Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross counted for all sins and all sinners of all time.

Jesus is rather saying that our life as his followers is patterned after his life. Jesus, though he was truly God and deserving of eternal glory, did not hold onto his glory with tight fists. Instead, he set it aside for awhile. He left his "rainbow-circled throne" for earthly night. He came to live under God's law and obey it as our substitute. And he came to die as our substitute. That was the Father's plan.

Jesus said "no" to glory and pleasure. He said "no" to the easy way out. And he said "yes" to his Father's plan for him, even though it involved the cross. He denied himself and took up his cross. He did it to serve you and me.

See where this is going? Jesus wants us to say "no" to ourselves and "yes" to God, even when that's hard. Even when that hurts.

Crosses can take a number of forms...

- It's a spouse in a marriage that doesn't seem to be working. But instead of taking friends' advice to divorce and be done with it, she keeps on working at it, even though she knows it's hard.

- It's a student who says no to cheating, even though that means taking a worse grade and watching the people who are cheating get good grades.

- It's an employee who puts in a hard day's work, even though he gets no better treatment than the guys who slack off on the job.

- It's a young person who resists the urge to get revenge on the jerks who pick on him at school, even though he knows that life will continue to be hard.

- It's a college student holding onto her Christian faith and convictions in the face of the virulent atheism and secularism on her campus. This especially Jesus identifies as a cross—when Christians suffer because they are connected to Jesus and because they're not willing to compromise the truth.

What are the crosses God is asking you to bear? Don't necessarily look for something big. Maybe your cross is big, but maybe it's small. Maybe it's something you have to go through or put up with because of your vocation as a student or a spouse or a parent or an employee. Something God has called you to do that's hard because

you're following Jesus. Whatever it is, embrace it. Remember that Jesus carried a cross for you, and his cross saves you. Out of gratitude to him, take up your cross and follow.

No other way to life

This is all hard to hear. Self-denial. Cross-carrying. But let's remember something important. Jesus leads us in the way of the cross to give us life, not to take life away. He says, For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Jesus knows that if we hold onto our self-pleasing desires, if we determine to keep on doing what our sinful nature tells us to do, we will ultimately lose our life. Oh sure, it may seem the opposite. It may seem best to just to do what we feel is right, whatever that is, even if it goes against what God says. That may seem like really living, living life the way we want. But Jesus knows that such a life is really no life at all; it's death. If we do what we want and cling to our sins, we lose our connection to God, the giver of life.

Instead of hanging on to our sin-filled lives, Jesus wants us to lose them. To confess our sins and have them absolved by God. And Jesus wants us to revel in what he freely gives: real life. Life to the full, life with God here and hereafter.

Let's do it. Let's lose our sinful life. Let's go back to our baptisms, when God took our sins and put them in the grave and brought forth a new life in us. Let's come to his table, where he takes our sins away and gives us the life he won by carrying his cross. We stand to gain life itself.

"The time has come, people. The kingdom of God is here. It's time for me to take up my cross. It's time for you to do the same. There's no other way. It's time to lose our lives. But don't worry. New life awaits. That's the plan. Who's with me?"

We're with you, Jesus. Carrying our crosses on the way to life eternal. Amen.