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Year A, Proper 1
Rev. Scott Deasy
Deacon

How did Jesus do it? How did he keep his “cool” throughout all that happened during this time of his ministry? He dealt with jealous and meanspirited religious leaders. Demanding crowds surrounded him. He had to find a place to sleep at night. Those closest to him occasionally surprised and pleased him with their understanding and faith in him and his message. But probably more times than not, left him gob-smacked by their narrow vision and understanding.

Today’s Gospel reading includes the last verses of the 16th Chapter of Matthew. The chapter begins with the Pharisees and Sadducees approaching Jesus on the western side of the Sea of Galilee demanding a “sign.” Jesus responds to their trap by saying that no sign would be given other than the “sign of Jonah.” Jesus and his disciples then travel by water to the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Just after arriving he discovers the disciples arguing over fact that they had failed to bring bread. Jesus and his party then travel 25 miles on foot to Caesarea Philippi, a beautiful green valley in the foothills with a refreshing stream. It had been used as a sacred site for centuries and an appropriate place for what we would call a retreat center. I can imagine them sitting by the stream relaxing and talking. It was there that Jesus asks the question “Who do you say that I am?”, to which Peter replied, “the Messiah.” Jesus then declares Simon Peter will be the stone upon which the church is built and be given the keys of the kingdom.

What follows next is today’s Gospel. This is the first of the four times in Matthew that Jesus instructs his disciples of his upcoming torture and death in Jerusalem. On each occasion he states that he will return on the third day. They seemingly fail to hear or understand this last part of the message. The author of Matthew, describes Jesus as “showing” the disciples that he must “go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering.”

This is an important point. Jesus is not simply “telling” or “explaining.” He is instructing by his actions, by example. Jesus, the Rabbi, the teacher. Jesus, the mentor, the guide. This is a critical aspect of Jesus’s ministry, reflecting his incarnational nature – Jesus’ complete divinity and humanity. Jesus mentored his disciples as he “showed” them his future. He mentored his disciples as they walked shoulder to shoulder to Jerusalem. His mentorship continues for us today.

Jesus had quite a task in front of him. Not only was he rebelling against the social norms and religious/political powers of his time, he was also invalidating the Hebrew understanding of Messiahship. There was no concept of a suffering Hebrew Messiah. None at all! Prophets? Yes, suffering was a central part of their job description, but not for the Messiah.

In fact, the Messiah was to free people from their suffering, not suffer with them. The Messiah was to be a great military and political leader who would overwhelm and vanquish the enemies of the Jewish people. There would be cheering in the streets and great celebration. Today, even with the example of Jesus as the Messiah, it seems many hope for a Messiah who comes in the form of a superhero or Jedi knight. That Messiah would enter the scene with forces and powers that would satisfy all dreams of retribution and vengeance. Do we suffer from the same myopia? We acknowledge prophets who suffer: Bonhoeffer, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. Do we understand the meaning of a suffering Messiah? Do we understand our role and responsibilities as his disciple?

Once again, Simon Peter enters the scene. Don't you just want to grab him by the shoulders and say "Dude - Listen!?" It is not hard to image him feeling pretty good about himself. He had just answered THE question correctly: Jesus is the Messiah! And been awarded the keys to the kingdom!

Now Peter decides to call out Jesus. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Kind of breathtaking, isn't it? How did Jesus do it, keep his "cool?" Jesus did not attack or condemn Peter. He demanded that Peter not stand in his way. Peter, the rock upon which the church was to be founded, the potential stumbling block!

"Get behind me Satan." The fourth chapter of Matthew contains the story of the temptations of Jesus. With the third temptation, the devil presented Jesus with the opportunity to rule all the kingdoms of the world, if only Jesus would worship him. The temptation presented to Jesus was to become the Military/Political Messiah that the Hebrews expected. Jesus' response was "Away with you, Satan!" Jesus was not here to rule this world, he was here to save it.

Stanley Hauerwas defines the devil as "the embodiment of the mystery of disobedience." Satan is "the embodiment of the mystery of disobedience." "The embodiment of the mystery of disobedience." Peter has fallen into Satan's trap as many have, beginning with Adam and Eve. The power of the devil is to "tempt." The other tool of the devil is "impatience." Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil - and do it immediately. Their sin was assuming they were equal with God. Peter, clouded by his love for Jesus and his failure to understand what he had been told, was taken in by temptation. He wanted to prevent Jesus' torture and death in Jerusalem. He wanted the vanquishing Messiah. Peter chose to speak for God and correct God's plan. Peter chose to stand in the way of Jesus' mission. Peter becomes Satan's spokesman. Jesus, once again, recognized and denied the temptation of Satan.

What follows next in this Gospel reading is THE call for us as followers of Jesus. This is what Jesus "shows" us.

"Then Jesus told his disciples, '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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'"

This reading gives one a sense of foreboding. It was, after all, written in the latter quarter of the first century following the destruction of Jerusalem. This was a time of war, oppression, and very intense persecution of followers of Jesus. People were being killed and driven from their homes. For them to commit to taking up their “cross” must have taken real courage.

This idea of taking up one’s cross is also a challenge for us. The meaning of “taking up one’s cross” has been trivialized. In ordinary conversation, we tend to limit the meaning of the “cross” by using it as a synonym for a “burdensome issue.”

We tend to think of it in terms of what is lost, not what is gained. The call here is not for self-effacement, meekness. Rather it is the acceptance of oneself as a beloved child of God. That is the “Good News!” In so doing, we are called into reciprocal relationships with other disciples and to enter into the Beloved Community. We are called into relationship with the one who made us.

The truer meaning for taking up one’s cross is living fearlessly in following Jesus. Following Jesus as our teacher, as our mentor - the crucified Lord. The cross represents a shameless death in the context of ridicule, hostility, and rejection. A death that becomes lifegiving. We are called to fearlessness as we travel to our Jerusalem. We are to speak God’s truth to power, as Jesus did. Bearing one’s cross means overcoming the ridicule, hostility, and rejection that we face on this journey by knowing the gift of being beloved by our Creator.

I ask again. How did Jesus do it? How did he keep his “cool?” He was doing God’s will; he was not alone. We are also not alone. Taking up one’s cross and following Jesus is finding one’s soul. Taking up our cross is walking shoulder to shoulder with Jesus. What an incredible gift that is!

Amen