

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
“A Turning Point”  
Rev. Lou Nyiri  
February 25, 2024

This morning's message is based upon Psalm 22:23-31 and Mark 8:27-38, let's lean in & listen to God's word for us this day...

**Psalm 22:23-31 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)**

You who fear the Lord, praise him!

    All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;  
    stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

<sup>24</sup> For he did not despise or abhor  
    the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me  
    but heard when I cried to him.

<sup>25</sup> From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
    my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

<sup>26</sup> The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
    those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
    May your hearts live forever!

<sup>27</sup> All the ends of the earth shall remember  
    and turn to the Lord,  
and all the families of the nations  
    shall worship before him.

<sup>28</sup> For dominion belongs to the Lord,  
    and he rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup> To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
    before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
    and I shall live for him.

<sup>30</sup> Posterity will serve him;  
    future generations will be told about the Lord

<sup>31</sup> and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
    saying that he has done it.

**Mark 8:27-38 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)**

**Peter's Declaration about Jesus**

<sup>27</sup> Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” <sup>28</sup> And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup> He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup> And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

**Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

<sup>31</sup> Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” <sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?<sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?<sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Siblings in Christ, This is the word of the Lord. / **Thanks be to God**

**Let us Pray:**

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.  
Come as the fire and burn,  
Come as the wind and cleanse,  
Come as the light and reveal,  
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:

That the words of my mouth  
And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you, for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

**Sermon**

In today's Markan text, Peter makes a bold statement about Jesus' identity – it shows that Peter is coming to understand that what they've been waiting for can be found in Jesus – the thing about Peter's statement though is that while it declares something about Jesus' life-direction – it still misses the mark.

This scene in Mark's gospel is a turning point – in Jesus' life – in the disciples' lives – in our lives.

From here on out – Jesus is focused on what lies ahead – and what lies ahead is a juxtaposition of life and death – namely Jesus' impending death on the cross & the promise that lies beyond the cross in Easter's proclamation.

Out of deep pain – new life can emerge.

Jesus begins to open the eyes of those gathered around him that in this life there will be suffering – suffering that will befall Jesus – and the identification with suffering to which we are called as Christ followers.

The Apostle Paul gets at this in 1 Corinthians 12:26, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

There is a purpose and a limit to the necessity of suffering.

One does not suffer to show one's faith or one's piety.

One does not suffer to be Jesus' best disciple.

The call to take up one's cross and follow Jesus is not a call to take on suffering so that the world will see how great I am because I suffer better than you.

All we need do is go back to where we began this Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday, we'll recall it began with a call to *not* practice our piety in public for others to see – rather it was/is a call to practice a faith that in the words of Matthew's gospel –avoids "practicing righteousness

before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Matthew 6:1)

To live in any other way is a form of narcissistic faith.

When Jesus talks about *taking up the cross* it is about choosing to speak out against suffering by joining alongside those who suffer.

From this point on in Mark's gospel, what Jesus does **is** what frees us to live in such ways.

Peter and the religious leaders though expected a different kind of Messiah –  
they were enduring suffering at the hand of the Roman government –  
they wanted a militarily mighty Messiah who would lead revolt against the established Roman authorities –  
they wanted a Messiah who would become oppressor over the oppressors –  
they wanted a Messiah who would begin everything anew by cleaning house –

While the Messiah Jesus preached – the Messiah Jesus is – was not what Jesus' contemporaries expected – it **is** the Messiah we need.

This Messiah is one who will suffer on our behalf –  
for Jesus' suffering is our suffering –  
it is the suffering of humanity –  
the very thing which frees us to live in response to what God in Jesus has done for us – and it calls us into a way of living that reflects the ancient practices of ancient Judaism which calls for the community to be connected to one another by the very way they live for and with one another.

To care for the least / To feed the hungry / To set the captives free /  
It's not about suffering for suffering's sake – it's about relieving the suffering of others.  
It's living a life of doing what's right and hard, rather than wrong and easy.

"Following Jesus," I once read, "is not trendy and cool."  
And if it ever is, then we've got the wrong Jesus.

Following Jesus is a life lived on behalf of others.  
The "divine things" Jesus wants disciples to focus on, are not the "human things" of popularity, prosperity and power.

Following Jesus is to embrace a way of living which sets aside one's own preferences in favor of Christ's preferences for us.

To take up the cross in the way of Jesus is to care for others when they are in need – and – to allow others to care for us when we are in need.

Presbyterian Pastor and 61<sup>st</sup> Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, Lloyd John Ogilvie's weekly Bible Study ended each session with participants declaring in unison, "Without God we can't. Without us God won't."

On a trip to Chicago, a pastor visited the city's Museum of Contemporary Art. This pastor discovered a haunting piece of art by Los Angeles based contemporary artist Erika Rothenberg.

Rothenberg's provocative work of art was a plastic lettered church aluminum and Plexiglas notice case which spelled out weekly life at a local congregation:

#### EVENINGS AT 7 IN THE PARISH HALL

Mon. Alcoholics Anonymous  
Tues. Abused Spouses  
Wed. Eating Disorders  
Thur. Say No To Drugs  
Fri. Teen Suicide Watch  
Sat. Soup Kitchen

Sunday Sermon 9 a.m.  
"America's Joyous Future"

The pastor wondered how others interpreted Rothenberg's work of art.

Did they see "America's Joyous Future" as an indictment of faith communities who gather for worship while remaining oblivious to the real hurts and needs of people?

Or did they see it as a sign that congregations are deeply immersed in human suffering, that their doors are wide open to the pathologies of the times?<sup>1</sup>

[Are] congregations / are worshipping communities / are faithful people living in such ways which bear hopeful witness amid human suffering by letting others know they're not alone because they choose to join alongside them in their suffering?

Amid life circumstance, the Psalmist discovers that God responds, not with a 3-credit course to reflect on the God whom Christian's worship and adore (theology); nor does God respond with a treatise on how to justify God's goodness in the face of evil and suffering (theodicy), rather God responds with theophany – God's very presence.

In the words of Psalm 22,

<sup>24</sup> For [God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; [God] did not hide [God's] face from me but heard when I cried to [God].

<sup>26</sup> The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever!

Akin to Lloyd John Ogilvie's Bible study's concluding liturgy, the poor eat and are satisfied, the afflictions of the afflicted are remedied – through the actions of God's faithful people.

When you find yourself or others in a place where hope is dissipating – where suffering seems suffocating – check in:

Call a friend – to see how they're doing or share how you're doing.

Give yourself the gift of a Stephen Minister – someone to walk alongside you with care, compassion, prayer, and a listening ear – call our Stephen Ministry Liaison Rev. Joanne Blair or me to begin the conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> -James P. Wind, "Places of Healing," Congregations, November-December 1997, 2-3.

Without God we can't – Without us God won't.

May we live in such ways that we bear witness to hope amid human suffering by letting others know they're not alone because we choose to join alongside one another in our suffering – by being the body of Christ – may we take up our cross and follow Christ by being the body of Christ.

Amen.