

WALKING WITH JESUS
Second Sunday of Lent
February 25, 2018
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Texts: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16;
Psalm 22.23-31;
Romans 4.13-25;
Mark 8.31-39

If the disciples had a yearbook, I think Peter would be voted most likely to make an asinine comment at the most inopportune moment. Today is the first in what will become a string of these stellar moments for Peter. The next will come very shortly on the heels of the first; a passage we read just two weeks ago on Transfiguration Sunday. Who can forget Peter's much more serious moment of claiming not to know Jesus on the night of his arrest? And this after boasting a few short hours before that he would never betray Jesus that he would in fact die before he would deny his Lord.

One way to see Peter in these moments is to notice his impulsivity. When something overwhelming or difficult comes Peter's way, he rushes to action. He needs to do something: to solve this or to stop that! It is easy from a distance to poke fun at Peter and to make light of his impulsivity. It's easy because it is all too familiar. So many of us find ourselves operating in similar ways. We find ourselves sitting before someone's suffering and we want to do something. Say something. Offer something. To sit in contemplation - to hold space for someone's suffering or for someone's questions - is far too unsettling.

Which can lead us to offer asinine comments in the most inopportune moments. Did any of you see Pastor Beth's post on Facebook this last week when she wrote: "Things I don't want to hear when I have a problem:

- 1) "This Too Shall Pass"
- 2) "everything happens for a reason"
- 3) "have you tried (fill in the blank) essential oil for that?"

Like so many of Pastor Beth's posts it was both substantive and funny. People were adding to the list of the stupid things people say as well as more funny comments about essential oils (which by the way I use and love) but they are not the end all-be all solution for every problem in the universe. But it also generated some genuine reflection from folk about how to show up differently than throwing around clichés or rushing to action.

Please do not hear what I am not saying. I am not casting aspirations on action or activism! We were drawn to join Grace Episcopal Church on Wednesday nights in Lent precisely because they were offering an opportunity to take what we learn from walking with Jesus in our worship and translate it into action. Action in response to human suffering is a powerful form of compassion. I have been watching in awe as these teenagers from FL have taken the trauma of their school shooting and moved that pain into full on action by meeting with their legislators and demanding change. This kind of activism that I know many of us are seeking to engage is an important part of what the Spirit is doing with us and through us!

AND I am wondering if there is a Word for us here today that might pull us in an additional direction. Toward contemplation and toward sitting with the discomfort of not knowing or being afraid or feeling overwhelmed. I say an additional direction because we cannot choose between contemplation OR activism even if some of us are clearly drawn more toward one than the other. Jesus clearly models both. He goes off alone to pray and then he enters the crowds to heal. He retreats with his disciples to rest and then he moves to the centers of power to confront.

Friends, this pull to "do something" is a human one. It is even a good impulse. It is a form of compassion in action. But what I notice with Peter -- what I notice sometimes in myself -- is that the good and natural impulse to respond can sometimes be pulled into an anxious impulsivity. Noticing the triggers and learning to sit with that anxiety before God is the starting place of healing. When we can move from that reflective, contemplative space where God's Spirit has done work with us and in us, then we can

move into intentional action that is truly responsive and helpful rather than reactionary and distracting.

The trigger for Peter was when Jesus speaks openly about the coming suffering that was inevitable. Peter and his fellow disciples had placed their trust in Jesus as the one who would fulfill the promises of God. And in his mind, there was no place for suffering. Suffering was, in his mind, a sign that God's promises had failed. From Peter's point of view, Jesus was describing an unraveling of everything they had been building in these years together. The thought of everything falling apart at this stage was unthinkable to Peter.

It raises the question for us of "what will it take to sit in a place of trust even when everything is falling apart all around us?" How did Abraham and Sarah "hope against hope"¹ and continue to believe as the promise of God took decades to unfold? How was it possible for them to "not weaken in faith"² or let "distrust make them waver"³? As Paul speaks of them today in Romans 4. Well if you know the whole story, you know that Paul was giving the glossed-over-funeral-eulogy version of their life of faith. They did panic as time went by and made a horrific mess of the relationships in their household when they got tired of waiting. Honestly it isn't about Abraham and Sarah's faith at the end of the day. The one who keeps faith in this story is God. The question is how do we keep the whole truth of God's faithfulness in front of us when there are so many forces pulling that truth apart?

Jesus could see at this stage in his ministry that suffering was inevitable but what he knew that Peter did not was that suffering could not destroy the power of God's love. Now I say the suffering that was inevitable not because Jesus **had** to die as if God were pulling some strings to arrange his death to appease some cosmic ledger balance - the death of an innocent for the forgiveness of the world. No-no-no-no! I say inevitable because the heart of who Jesus is and what he came to teach us and show us and make possible for us was so threatening to the power structures of this world -

¹ Romans 4.18, NRSV

² Romans 4.19, NRSV

³ Romans 4. 20, NRSV

both political and religious – that it was inevitable that they would try to shut him down.

At this stage in Jesus' ministry he could sniff their fear. The religious leaders had just come in vs. 11 of this chapter looking to argue with him demanding a sign from him. But theirs was not a genuine seeking and searching. They already had in mind what God was doing and their preconceived notions - their broken truth - kept them from discerning what God was doing right there in front of their face. In that passage (vs 14) was a word of caution we need to take directly to heart. When Jesus cautioned his disciples to "Watch out and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees (the religious powers) and the yeast of Herod (the political or cultural powers)."⁴

It wasn't just the disciples that needed to be careful about the thoughts and attitudes influencing them and pulling them from God's truth. The intensity of Jesus' reaction to Peter today shows that Jesus himself had to be cautious and keep infusing his soul and his mind with the whole truth of God's promises.

Where does that infusion happen for you? For me it is in my attic in the morning as I sing and read scripture and pray for you and for me and for the world and read books by people who are steeped in the whole truth of God's promises whether they think of it that way or not. For others it is on their morning run as they feel the energy and power of their body and connect that to the energy and power of God's Spirit. For others it is the hike through the woods or the gathering with a close circle of friends to sit in silence or to speak from the heart and feel the presence of Jesus in their midst.

Another place for me is at this table. As I take into my body this bread and this cup, I envision the Holy Spirit infusing into my body the life force of Jesus. For this bread and this cup signify and seal to us his body and his blood. And what is blood but the force of life? And it is his force of life and conviction of faith that I so desperately need – and that we all so

⁴ Mark 8.15, NRSV

desperately need – if we are to sit in a place of trust when it seems that everything is coming apart.

So this table is set before us each and every Sunday in this season of Lent. Jesus invites us to come and to let this time and this space and this sacrament infuse our soul and mind and body with his force of life and his conviction of faith.

And so he says to us: Come for all things are now ready.