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September 3, 2023
"Preaching the Passion in Ordinary Times"
Exodus 3:1-15 and Matthew 16:21-28

Shortly after moving to DC in 2021, my daughters and I were at home one morning when it started to rain. There was nothing unusual about the weather, but my younger daughter Lucia looked at me with wide eyed disbelief-how can it be raining, she asked-during the morning???? There are two distinct seasons in Mexico City, where we used to live- there's a wet season and a dry season. During the wet season, which lasts from June until November it only rains in the late afternoon and evening. There is no deviating from this schedule-it simply never rains in the morning. Even ordinary things like rain surprise us when they happen out of season. So when I turned my attention to today's lectionary, I felt unprepared for what I found- Matthew's text is a "hinge" passage that shifts the narrative from Jesus' ministry to Jesus' end. In it, Jesus prepares the disciples for his suffering. It's a story we all know well-it's THE defining story about Jesus, but we usually read about the passion of Christ during Lent and Holy Week.

As this summer draws to a close, we find ourselves in the midst of our hinges, transitioning, too. Church, school and work commitments are picking up again, and there is a marked shift in the pace of life as we go from vacation mode to the fall. But liturgically, we are still very much in “ordinary” time, not yet Advent or Lent, but bobbing about in this relatively unremarkable period of the Christian calendar. Liturgical seasons offer familiar story arcs that help us sharpen and refocus on God in particular ways. In the Christian calendar, those high seasons-like Advent and Lent- are dynamic-full of traditions and emotions-they invite us to respond, to act, to define and wrestle with our faith as we confront the wonder and heartbreak of the Biblical story.

But it's those long stretches of in-betweens, the ordinary, the mundane, the comfortable- where a lot of life happens. Those times require a different rhythm of faithfulness-one that is steadfast, proactive, persistent. And there is rich work to do there, exploring the life and teachings of Jesus and the building of the church. But like the end of summer that always arrives too soon, this passage is a jolt to the system. As Douglas R. A. Hare, Professor Emeritus from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, says -it reminds us that the gospels are primarily passion narratives with extended introductions. Preaching the passion in ordinary time forces us to confront the urgency of the gospel when the world tells us we've got lots more time. What does it look like to take up the cross on an average day in September, when the ordinary and the urgent vie for our attention? When lunches need to be prepared and yet the air is filled with haze from distant wildfires, when there are meetings to attend and newsfeeds bombard us with violence near and far. How should we be faithful when life overwhelms with the everyday and the existential?

Immediately before this passage Peter had just affirmed Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is a moment of great clarity: a confession upon which the church will be built. It is truly a high point -a rare ‘aha’ moment when the disciples seem to really “get it.” But that honeymoon period doesn’t last long, and what comes next contains the first of Jesus’ many predictions of his death. In terms of the narrative, Hare writes that, “This first passion prediction is the watershed moment that divides Jesus’ Galilean ministry from the coming passion...” It is such a sharp turn in the narrative that Peter rebukes Jesus when he says that he must suffer, saying “*God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!*”

Charles Hambrick Stowe, a congregational pastor and dean of Northern Seminary, writes that the disciples' instinct to embrace Jesus' exemplary goodness while avoiding the blood of the cross, is a "stumbling block" to God's mission in the world. "*Get behind me, Satan,*" Jesus says to Peter, when he says there must be another way. Suddenly Peter, the "rock" on which the church will be built becomes a "stumbling block" to the faith. You can't blame him-his deep love for Jesus prevents him from accepting what is to come. But Jesus' suffering can't and won't be avoided. Wanting his ethics but not his cross is to "shut out the power of God and the wisdom of God" says Hare. From a "theological perspective, the announcement of Jesus' suffering and death provides important instruction about the lifestyle of his followers." To "take up the cross" is a metaphor for self denial, it invites us to surrender pride, ego, status, comfort...sometimes even life...for the sake of God's kingdom."

I remember the first time I saw them-pilgrims-on their journey to the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City. It didn't really click at first, because the feast day for the Virgin of Guadalupe, was still weeks away. I was coming home from a site visit in the state of Puebla, just east of Mexico City, when I began to see lines of people walking along the side of the highway. At first there was just a trickle, but as I continued to drive, slowly now at this point, I noticed more and more people. There were men and women, children and babies, people of all ages. On foot, on bicycle, pushing strollers, in caravans, resting on the backs of trucks, walking on their knees. They carried banners and sculptures with the likeness of La Virgen on their backs. We were more than 80 miles away from the basilica; with a mountain and a vast urban jungle standing between us. I have to confess that I was moved to tears by what I saw-but my emotions ranged from disbelief to indignation to humility and awe. I wanted to cry to the people I passed on the highway-God does not require this of you-God has already suffered FOR you so that you do not have to do this! God did not mean for you to carry a literal cross!

But there was something in their journey that I had never witnessed before—a willingness to show devotion through the sweat and tears of their own body. A physical embodiment of faithfulness the likes of which I quite simply had never seen or experienced. Any given year, around December 12th, nearly 9 million people will make that trek to the hill of Tepeyac in northern Mexico City, to the Basilica. They come with prayers for miracles and healing, they come to show gratitude for prayers that have been answered, they come to show their devotion to a holy, brown skinned mother of God who made herself known on the margins of society, to people who knew great suffering firsthand. So their ancestors take up their crosses, in faith and trust that God will look favorably upon them and their loved ones. They give what they have—their very selves, in the hope of new life.

God does not require, or even ask us to walk miles on our knees or suffer in order to earn God's love or salvation. Too many people have used that kind of theology to subjugate or abuse people throughout history. The beauty of atonement is that Jesus took our place so that we would not have to suffer. But that kind of act-of solidarity, of love, of selflessness -invites a serious response from those of us who confess Jesus as Lord. Perhaps in this ordinary season, reading the passion story invites us to examine what kind of cross we will take up in the pursuit of everyday discipleship. Rev. Hambrick Stowe writes that "Atonement that is *for us* will involve us...and that the gospel is an invitation to death before it bestows new life...I don't know what this cross looks like for you, but I think it's a question worthy of your prayer.

For Peter, this meant overturning his firmly held expectations of who a Messiah was; for pilgrims, it's using one's very body in the hopes that prayers will be answered. It might mean surrendering self-centered ambitions or lifestyles; abandoning the pursuit-*or facade*-of perfection; admitting you need help and letting others help you; releasing anger and resentment to make room for forgiveness, letting go of comfort and control in exchange for solidarity with those in need. Jesus' invitation is a hard one to accept-and the particularities of what it looks like are different for each of us. If the disciples are any indication, we will never get discipleship "right." Mercifully, achievement or perfection is not the goal, nor is it within our capacity- it is in the pursuit, the act of letting go of the ways of this world in order to follow the way of Jesus, that we are resurrected to a new life. In this new season, may we have the courage and the faith to trust that what lies ahead is worth that cost. Amen.