

Last week Bishop Wolf asked us “who is Jesus for you?”. She recounted some of the ways in which others have experienced Jesus: some as metaphors like rock, bread of heaven, light, way, truth, light, Good Shepherd; others as attributes like companion, weeper, mourner, redeemer, the one who forgives, strength, rabbi, others as divinity, like Son of the Living God, King, or even Messiah. We can relate to these as we hear the stories of Jesus’ life and ministry, his life as a human being, one who dwelt among us and who had an extraordinary impact on others. Thanks to his faithfulness unto death we can put shape, and form, and substance to the one who is known to us 2000 years later in the breaking of the bread.

How different, then, is the experience of Moses when he encounters God! Moses was tending his father-in-law’s sheep in the wilderness. Perhaps he was reflecting on the decisions and actions that had brought him to this place, on the run for murder, away from the life of luxury in the palace of pharaoh, a misfit amongst the Egyptians with whom he had been raised, and now distrusted by the people he saw as his own, the Hebrews, now being treated as pharaoh’s slaves. It was an ordinary day for Moses until suddenly an angel of the Lord appears to him from a burning bush. His curiosity was piqued and when he goes over to take a look at the bush that is burning and yet not being consumed by the flames, God speaks to him. God identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob which certainly helps the context when God then explains that he wants Moses to lead God’s people out of Egypt to a promised land. God also promises to be with Moses as Moses goes about this task. Needless to say Moses is feeling a bit ambivalent about his new role and asks God “what is your name? Meaning who the heck are you really? God gives the overpowering answer I AM WHO I AM! God is revealing God’s self as the very essence of be-ing, not being as in a creature but as the source of all that is, of all energy of all life. Now my explanation has probably violated all kinds of theological understandings of God so let’s just say that God is beyond our understanding and any attempt to describe God is subject to the limitations of our human experience. We can appreciate Moses’ concern about going to pharaoh or his fellow Hebrews to convince them to follow him because of an encounter with a burning bush – such an image just wouldn’t carry a lot of weight. So who exactly is it that they were supposed to follow? Moses got the kind of answer that “was what it was” and he was going to have to lump it because God was going to work on him until he said yes.

This makes the need for Jesus, mortal, human, flesh and blood Jesus, so understandable. The Jesus who was born and lived and died among us is much easier to grasp than the God who said of himself “I AM”. We can relate to many of those descriptions that Bishop Wolf shared with us. Except, well except that just when we think we are all set with Jesus as the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, we find that we don’t or won’t understand at all ... as Peter discovers in our reading today.

Just last week Peter had earned brownie points for naming Jesus “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. (Matt 16:16) Then “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised,” (Matt 16:21) Peter can’t quite believe his ears, it just doesn’t jibe with what his notion of the role of the Son of the Living God, the Messiah. He anticipated triumph and glory but in Peter’s eyes there is no apparent glory in suffering and death. He simply could not imagine that there might be triumph from the grave. Peter never heard that last part about Jesus being raised on the third day. That was the triumph, not the earthly aspirations in the title of “Messiah”.

And in case his reference to suffering and death wasn’t clear, Jesus goes on to say, “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”. (Matt 16:25)

Jesus was talking to his disciples then but those words are meant for us today. Jesus may have died to set us free but that does not free us from the obligation to take up the cross. Our freedom in Christ does not relieve us of the responsibility of trying to live as he lived, in fulfilling the words of the prophets who demanded justice for all, especially the poor, the sick, those who have been rejected by society. And sometimes that is going to be uncomfortable as we challenge ourselves to expand what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. There is freedom in giving our lives over to Jesus and joy that comes with it, a paradox that has to be experienced to be believed. I submit to you that our cross today is the racism that pervades our society.

We need to take up this cross so that we can dismantle the structures, assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors that make it okay to shoot a black man seven times in the back in front of his children. It is not just about the police. The police are the products of a society that teaches those who are white to fear black men, that makes it okay to treat black men, all black lives for that matter, as something less. We are all created equal in the eyes of God. One of the great aspirations of this country was stated in the Declaration of Independence: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

It is hard for those of us who pride ourselves on moral behavior to understand that we participate in and perpetuate the racism that makes the lives of black Americans difficult even today. The racism that questions a black man for jogging, for trying to enter his own home, for simply driving, or a black woman for being in her own home, or while shopping. These are all challenges for black people in a predominantly white society. These challenges are the legacy of racism which began with slavery and did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation. The

racist policies of our society were reinstated through the Jim Crow laws, (i.e. segregation) that were in effect until 1968, the threat of lynching, voter suppression, and the redlining that still goes on today. Many of our oldest institutions were built on the backs of slaves if not the slave trade itself. We found excuses for our treatment of blacks by trying to prove them inferior as if they were lesser human beings. Science tells us otherwise. Race is social concept, not a genetic one”, the difference between races is a variation of .01%. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/22/science/do-races-differ-not-really-genes-show.html?>). And if that doesn't convince you then the trajectory of scripture to include everyone in God's loving embrace certainly should.

I beg you to think about that cross and what you need to do to accept it and then help to carry it. What do you need to learn, what do you need to understand, about the experience of blacks in this country to be willing to work to dismantle the effects of racism?

Amen