

Lent 2; Year B; John 2:13-22 (“Get behind me, Satan!”)
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One moment I was a regular person with regular problems. And the next, I was someone with cancer. So writes Kate Bowler in her fantastic memoir entitled: “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I Have Loved.” Before my mind could comprehend it, cancer was there – swelling to take up every space my imagination could touch. A new and unwanted reality. There was a before, and now there was an after. Time slowed to a pulse...Married in my twenties, a baby in my thirties, I won a job at my alma mater straight out of graduate school. I felt breathless with the possibilities. Actually, it’s getting harder to remember what it felt like, but I don’t think it was anything as simple as pride. It was certainty, plain and simple, that God had a worthy plan for my life in which every setback would also be a step forward. I wanted God to make me good and make me faithful, with just a few shining accolades along the way. Anything would do if hardships were only detours on my long life’s journey. I believed God would make a way. I don’t believe that anymore....I have cancer, and everyone else in the world is on Instagram.

Bowler’s story, in places, made me want to cry because her loss of innocence is so universal -- something we all have to suffer at some point. We get through ten or twenty or 50 years of our lives believing in a universe that rewards good and punishes evil, until one day life slams on the brakes and we learn the truth: we can do everything right, and still get hurt. Goodness is absolutely no protection from pain.

If life teaches us that core truth, our faith confirms it. Jesus was as good as it gets and still he suffered pain – not only physical pain but also spiritual and emotional pain – just like us. He was, after all, a human being. But here’s what I want us to pay attention to this morning: ***Jesus faced into the pain instead of running away from it. And in so doing, Jesus showed us a stunning new way to live.***

In this season of Lent we are exploring, for 40 days, paths to God. The idea is based on a quote from Thomas Merton who said, “at the center point of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point of spark which belongs entirely to God.” Simply, we need not go searching “out there” for God. God is inside of us, down deep, with us all the time. And if we want God, or an experience of God, we must discover, and then travel, pathways down into that “point of nothingness” within ourselves. Jesus was a wisdom teacher, who came to show us many paths to the God within each one of us – both through teaching, and by the way he lived his life. In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus is in pain. And what he chooses to do with that pain reveals, for us, a clear path to God that’s worthy of our attention and consideration.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is breaking the bad news to his disciples, for the first time, that he is going to die, and it is going to be awful: bloody, painful, humiliating. He doesn’t want them to be fooled, however. When the time comes, he tells them, they are not to believe Jesus’ death is some horrible mistake that should be avoided. They are to believe that God is in it, working to turn Jesus’ hurt flesh into a body that will last forever.

That is what Jesus wants them to know, but Peter hears only the first part, the suffering and death part. “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you,” Peter protests. It is hard to tell what is going on

inside Peter's head. Plenty of people say he was putting his own agenda ahead of God's. But my own understanding is simpler than that. I just think Peter loved Jesus and didn't want to see him die. Perhaps death was the worst fear Peter had, and that Jesus' reference to his own death cranked Peter's fear up so high he couldn't stand what Jesus was saying, even for one minute.

"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" Why? *Because if it can happen to you, it can happen to me.* It can happen to anyone, and no one is safe. If Jesus is vulnerable, then so is everyone else. I think that is what Peter is protesting. But Jesus' response to him is just as strong, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It is the harshest rebuke Jesus gives anyone in all the Gospels, but his use of the word "Satan" lets us know something important – and that is, just how tempted Jesus is. Peter's suggestion that he should be spared matches something inside of Jesus. Jesus would pray the same thing himself before he died. ("My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.") Jesus is tempted, yes. But he also knows something else. That while God has given Jesus a vision of his death – that vision isn't all dark. It leaks light. There is clearly something that lays beyond all that suffering, and *Jesus knows his job is to walk toward it instead of running away.*

It was a vision Jesus tries to share with his disciples, by daring them to follow him. If they are not afraid to lose their lives, he tells them, they might be surprised to find them. The image Jesus uses is a cross, which had no religious meaning at that time, since Jesus had not yet died on one. A cross was simply a method of execution preferred by the Roman government. These were days when the road to Jerusalem was lined with crosses. Crucifixion was not only an efficient form of punishment, it was also a very effective form of intimidation. It reinforced the idea that death was the most awful thing that could ever happen to a person.

By telling his disciples to pick up their crosses, Jesus defies that idea. He suggests that there are worse things than death in the world, and that living in fear is near the top of the list. If they are going to let fear run their lives, then fear will become their god. The only standard for their behavior will become how much something scares them or not. If it does not scare them, they will do it. If it does scare them, they will not. What Jesus knows is that when their anxious days finally come to an end, they will discover that they had never really lived at all.

But that is not the only choice the disciples have, of course. Instead of surrendering themselves to their fear, they can surrender themselves to God. They can decide to shift their consciousness and let go. They can decide to surrender to the flow of God and God's will. They can decide to trust that they can find a way to deny the panic-stricken voice inside of them—the one that keeps ordering them to play it safe – and listen for that other voice instead, the one that says, "Wake up. Follow me. Do not fear." They can choose that path that never promises safety, but always promises life. They can choose the path that never offers freedom from pain, but offers instead freedom from fear.

Of course, we don't have to get ourselves killed in order to follow Jesus. Some people have. We call them saints. But God seems to allow the rest of us a broader understanding of the cross. Jesus tells the disciples to pick up their cross and follow him. You'll notice Jesus doesn't tell them *where* to find their crosses, because they already know where they are. Jesus encourages them to go ahead and pick the

wretched things up – to stop covering them up and tripping over them and pretending they are not there. He urges them to squat down and get hold of them so they can find out for themselves that there is more to life than being afraid of death.

Two thousand years later, our own crosses do not have much to do with standing up to the Roman government. But fear is timeless, and my guess is that each of us has something of which we are deathly afraid, something that brings us to our knees, our own personal kryptonite. Whatever it is that scares us to death, so that we start offering to do anything, anything at all, if it will just go away – that is our cross, and if we leave it lying there it will kill us. If we turn away from it (God forbid it, Lord!) with the excuse that this should never have happened to us, then we deny God the chance to show us the greatest mystery of all: that there, right there in the dark fist of our worst fears, is the door to abundant life.

For most of my life I have been carrying the cross of the dysfunction that plagues my family of origin. Untreated mental health disorders, disinheritance, shunning, betrayal - all of these relational gems punctuate generations of my family, and even after decades of therapy they still bring me to my knees sometimes. Though my parents ultimately could not stem the tide of the manifestation of these crosses in the next generation, they did try. At a particularly painful juncture in our family life, my parents dragged us into family therapy where we were asked to hash out our issues. The therapist clued into the fact that many of our problems as a family were rooted in our individual fears. Instead of letting us run away from what scared us most, he required us to walk toward them instead. After I said something scared me, he'd say, "Well if that happened, what would happen next?" I'd answer, and he'd reply, "And then what would happen...and then what would happen...? When I'd finally arrive at the end, which would usually be, "And then I would die," he would say, "And then what would happen?" "I guess, then I would be with God." To this day when I am feeling particularly anxious or afraid, when my cross rears its ugly head, I try not to run away, but walk myself through this drill instead. And guess what? In picking always reminds me that God is waiting patiently for me on the other side of all of my worst fears.

What Jesus models for us is nothing less than a path to God. "Stop running from your cross," I imagine him saying, "Reach down and pick the sucker up. It isn't nearly as scary once you get your hands on it, and no one is asking you to handle it alone. All you have to do is believe in God more than you believe in your fear. Then pick it up, come on with me, and I will show you the path to the door." AMEN.

Sources:

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