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Sermon: An Inconvenient Faith
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If I had to, I would have characterized my energy levels before looking at the lectionary text for this week as “cautiously confident.” Here I am: I’m in a new church, building relationships, and offered my first Sunday in the pulpit. What would the lectionary throw at me? So far this summer we’ve had Jesus feeding the multitudes, Jesus walking on water and the power of faith, and last week Pastor Clint preached on Jesus’ classic Sermon on the Mount while the lectionary text was Simon confessing Jesus as the son of the living God, receiving his name, Simon Peter, meaning “rock.” These are classic, empowering Bible stories with timeless lessons for any age.

I logged off of my Facebook page and pulled up the lectionary, news headlines still swirling in my mind as I looked up the scripture. In our country with political fractures that seem irreparable, what message of overpowering divine presence could be found? As America is forced to wrestle with its history of systemic racism and racial tensions flare, what message of conquering love would be offered? Then I read the header for this morning’s scripture, reading: “Jesus Foretells His Death”. I just say to myself, “God, you have got to be kidding me.”

A global pandemic has shut down our businesses, our schools, and our world, and Jesus encourages us to deny ourselves? Activists, protesters, and professional athletes are vocalizing frustration with our country’s history of injustice to people of color, and we’re now being reminded of our savior’s slow walk to death on a cross? I have to admit, I debated switching up the scripture for the morning, after all I was told I could preach on whatever I wanted and we are an Easter people, so I easily could have swapped out “Get behind me, Satan” for “The Lord is my shepherd.” But that urge to tidy up our faith, to skip past the suffering Jesus and jump right for Easter Jesus is exactly the point of this story. It’s an inconvenient scripture for an inconvenient faith.

As Matthew tells it, Peter has just confessed Jesus as the son of God, and is rewarded by being named the rock on which Jesus’ church will be built. After seeing the many miracles of Jesus, his teachings to the masses, and his promise to completely change the power structures of the ancient world, Simon was ready to double down – he recognized Jesus as the Messiah long promised by the prophets. For generations stories had been told about the Messiah to come who would overturn the power structures that had constantly oppressed the people of God, and here he was in the form of Jesus. He proclaims Jesus as Messiah and becomes Jesus’ right hand man. He seems ready to go into battle, when all of the sudden Jesus announces that he has to die. Not only does he have to die, but he’ll go to Jerusalem –the big city- during Passover, the most public place possible, and die at the hands of the empire he seemed poised to destroy. It’s no wonder then that Simon (now Simon Peter) exclaims “God, forbid it Lord!” Surely you’re not going to just walk right into the jaws of power and give up. God, you have got to be kidding me.

This incredulity and disbelief is a common thread throughout the Bible however. The Old Testament text in the Lectionary that is paired with our reading for today is the call of Moses in Exodus 3. I grew up watching the movie *The Prince of Egypt* and vividly remember the scene in which Moses, exiled from Egypt after killing a guard, is tending sheep, perfectly content with his new life as a shepherd and son-in-law of a priest. After chasing down a lost sheep, he finds a small bush covered in flames, but not burning. The voice of God speaks directly to Moses, calling on him to free the captives in Egypt, and Moses tries again and again to shirk this inconvenient responsibility. “Well, who should I say is sending me,” Moses asks. After God offers the Divine Name, “Tell them I AM has sent you,” Moses looks for another excuse – “But why me? I’m slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Once again, God offers a rebuttal. This happens again and again until Moses finally agrees to take up the daunting task of leading Israel out of slavery. Moses was looking for comfort and convenience but was met by and inconvenient God.

Throughout the Bible, God speaks through paradoxes, because it is in these paradoxes that God’s message can best be heard. In the story of the burning bush, why would God call a man who is a self-professed terrible public speaker to call on Pharaoh to release his thousands of enslaved people? And in our Matthew story, Simon Peter is named the bedrock on which Jesus’ church will be built, but that same rock is declared to be a stumbling block only five verses later. How could such a solid foundation be so easily shaken? Wouldn’t it be better for God to choose a natural public speaker who clamors for the limelight? And shouldn’t Jesus probably name a different disciple as the bedrock of the church?

As humans, we look for simple, straightforward solutions to our problems. Simon Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah who was promised by prophets of old to bring freedom to God’s people. He’s already been with Jesus as he preached, taught, and performed miracles, so why would he just give up and suffer a humiliating, public death at the hands of the powers that he was supposed to destroy?

It is because of this incredibly human trait that Jesus offers his strong rebuke, “Get behind me Satan!” This is a call back to Satan’s temptation of Jesus during his forty day journey through the wilderness, as Jesus shouts the same words here as back in Matthew 4. In both cases, there is this offer of an easy way out – just turn those rocks into loaves of bread! Just keep doing what you’re doing Jesus, no need to suffer for it!

I think Jesus knows exactly what he’s doing when he offers this sharp criticism. He knows humanity’s tendency for comfort and convenience, and he wants to cut it off before it even begins. He needs to embed in his newly-named rock of the church the understanding that the hardest work is yet to come.

Now when Jesus tells his disciples to “take up their crosses and follow him,” what exactly does he mean? Contrary to some interpretations of this text, Jesus is not advocating martyrdom for his disciples, at least not in the sense that we think. To take up our crosses isn’t necessarily about dying in the name of Christ, but rather it is about giving up on some of our human tendencies.

Jesus tells Peter that the church needs to set its mind on divine things and ignore that which makes us human. *We cannot let our humanity get in the way of doing God's divine work.* While for Jesus that meant ignoring the ultimate human desire of survival in order to spread the love of God, and for the disciples that meant risking their freedom and lives to preach the gospel in an inhospitable world, for us it means stepping outside of our comfort zones.

As people living two millennia in the future, we are immune to some of the incredulity of Peter and some of the fear associated with carrying the message of Jesus. Living in a world that values Christian morals, the message of Jesus no longer seems that radical. In our society, the cross is no longer a murder weapon meant to frighten dissidents into submission – it's something that adorns valued social institutions and is used for jewelry worn around peoples' necks. Centuries of Christian society have made our faith comfortable, and we've found ways to use our faith to promote our own human notion of victory. We have warped its message to dehumanize people and ostracize entire communities, all in the name of Christ. We have used it to prop up powers that seek their own earthly profit over the benefit of all – we have focused on human things, not divine things.

As humans, we look for the comfortable, for what's easy. Remembering the promise of God's eternal, victorious reign over death is more convenient than the difficult, often inconvenient challenge of bringing about the bountiful banquet of God here on earth.

So, what can we do? How can we take up the call to embrace discomfort and bring the banquet of God to the here and now? I was wondering this exact question as I went for a walk the other day and had my mask dangling from my ear, putting it on as I passed people on the trail in my neighborhood. While they provide a physical discomfort and sometimes make it a little harder to breathe, these masks help to protect those who have weakened immune systems. This one, small, physical discomfort serves as a reminder that we exist outside of our own selves – that God calls us to serve others.

I saw the banquet of God in the education lecture this past winter in which over 100 members (remember those large indoor gatherings??) here gathered in Fellowship Hall to discuss how the church can serve as a mediator in conversations about issues, all in an effort to heal the political divide that seems more like a chasm every day.

I see the banquet of God in the Church's ongoing conversations with the LGBTQ+ community and the willingness to wrestle with the challenging question of what it means to be made in the image of God, ensuring that all people feel the love and welcome of God.

I also see it in the inconvenience of city streets shut down for nonviolent protest against extrajudicial killings and systemic injustice. Hashtags fly across our screens and names scroll almost like ticker tape: Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake. With these names come stress, frustration, anxiety and argument, to the point where we are looking for any way to avoid discussion because we can't stand to be uncomfortable anymore.

It's in our willingness to challenge our own assumptions and discuss and listen and learn that God's voice can be heard, however. In his book *Dear Church*, Rev. Lenny Duncan, a pastor in the ELCA, talks about the modern church's relationship with injustice the radical nature of Jesus' teaching. Paraphrasing him, a single voice, unwilling to listen is the voice of the empire. Instead its through discussion and a willingness to listen to others' stories that God's word is heard.

It makes sense that a movement like Black Lives Matter might give people anxiety and fear, since it calls into question some of the pillars on which our society is built. But as these movements gain momentum and thousands take to the streets in protest, regardless of our own personal political leanings, we are called to the niter into conversation with about race and privilege and embrace the discomfort and inconvenience that these conversations bring. God is present in discussions about race and privilege, and there is power that comes from the courage and willingness to put aside our human ideas of comfort and instead be vulnerable with one another. That is the divine thing Jesus is talking about.

As we go about our lives as followers of Christ, we are often called to act in ways that challenge the status quo. Rather than shy away from those moments, we need to find the courage to take up our crosses and embrace the discomfort. The power of the gospel doesn't come from complicity and comfort; rather it comes from the willingness to make our faith inconvenient for the sake of others.