

What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus? Frederick Buechner suggests that after his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness asking himself the question of what it meant to be Jesus, and that during Lent Christians are to ask in one way or another what it means to Christians.

Before we can understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus the Christ, we must understand what it meant for Jesus to be Messiah. It is these two questions that Jesus addresses in this text. His answers are as difficult now as they were then.

If Buechner is right and Jesus figured out what it meant to be him while he was in the wilderness, then he had to have known that to preach liberation to the captive and release to the oppressed would not sit well with Rome. And he, along with all of the Roman world was very clear on the lengths Rome would use to crush any hint of opposition to their imperial rule.

Jesus knew that crucifixion was Rome's favorite instrument of control – it was shameful, and terrorizing, and a very public deterrent to people like him.

Mark sets up the story with Jesus' question to his disciples: "Who do *you* say I am?" And Peter, who is always jumping in says, "You are the Christ."

I wonder if Jesus thought, "Well maybe they are beginning to understand who I am and what my journey, my calling entails. Maybe I can begin to teach them what will happen as I continue on this journey."

So, Jesus begins to teach them about what will happen – the collision course that has been set in motion between the powers of Rome, the powers in the Jewish community, and his message of a new kingdom on earth.

When he gets to the part about suffering and dying, it becomes apparent that the disciples are not quite as far along as Jesus had hoped.

They are so astonished at this teaching that they entirely miss the part about rising from the dead after three days.

This is not what they expected. The Messiah was supposed to deliver Israel from Roman oppression. A suffering and dying Messiah was simply not acceptable.

So the disciples appoint Peter to have a little talk with Jesus. Imagine, Peter walks over to Jesus, puts his arm around him, and takes him aside to set him straight about messiahship. “Suffering, rejection, and death are not on the agenda. Prestige, power, and dominion *are* the agenda. It’s David’s throne *we’re* after, ruling the nations with power and might. We signed on for a crown, not a cross!”

Jesus turns and looks at his disciples – I have to wonder how long and how deep that look touched their hearts. Then he rebukes Peter, but this is a rebuke aimed at every disciple. “Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

How often does this happen to each of us? Our hearts know that Jesus is the Christ. We know it deep inside and we mean to make that the way we live.

The problem comes when our very human egos start telling us what that means. We are no different from those first disciples. Our agendas for furthering the kin-dom of God are very often based on how we think that kin-dom should look. We want our churches full of people – and yet we really want the right kind of people. We want those new people to feel welcome and yet what if they have new ideas. We want to serve our community – and yet we often decide what folks need rather than listening to the folks we want to help. We want St. John’s Chapel to be here in the future, and yet it is hard to change the way we’ve done things for fifty years. I wonder if we, too, think we have signed on for a crown instead of a cross.

Just like those first disciples, we really do mean well. It is very hard to hear that in order to follow Jesus we might have to remove ourselves from the center of our concerns and relinquish status and power in favor of service to others.

Jesus know that – he knew it about his first disciples and he knows it about us.

After that long stare and scathing rebuke, I imagine Jesus sighs and then calls not only the disciples but the crowd that was following them and he begins to tell them how they can be the disciples they and we long to be.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

We’ve heard this so often that we immediately hear “take up your cross.” If you Google images of take up your cross thousands of pictures pop up of someone dragging an immense cross on their shoulders. Not exactly the kind of billboard ad that would attract someone to follow Jesus.

And then our minds hear so many people saying “It’s just my cross to bear.”

No – that is not what Jesus is saying.

He didn’t mean suffering for the sake of suffering, or enduring a mental or physical illness, or caring for a loved one even if it kills us, or staying in an abusive relationship.

Mark is writing this thirty years after Jesus life, death, and resurrection. Paul has already written his epistles and it is likely that Mark’s audience knew not only the story but that the cross itself had changed for them.

Of course, it was still a symbol of terror and oppression. Rome hadn’t given up crucifixion as a means of control.

But for the community of believers, it was also a symbol of hope and new life. Just as it is for us today.

Perhaps the cross that Jesus is talking about is being willing to be a disciple knowing that it won't always be easy. We won't always get it right and when we are overwhelmed here is the billboard that Jesus hopes flashes in front of our eyes. The one that says his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

That's why he prefaces the whole take up your cross message with you must deny yourself (the part we miss). Don't make this all about you or try to do this alone.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness to make this journey of his all about himself – to be the hero in this story. Each time he is tempted, he turns the story back to God. He denies himself and his human expectations. He places the power to walk his journey squarely in the care of the Divine.

Then Jesus says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.

Jesus isn't saying we have to die – how would we ever accomplish ushering in the kin-dom of God on earth if we die.

He is saying – lose your ego. Stop setting your mind on human things instead of divine things.

Let go of controlling, let go of worrying about tomorrow, let go of carrying past hurts and mistakes.

I know, much easier said than done.

And yet, when I'm not worrying about tomorrow or hefting and rearranging the burdens of the past – I am free to live in the present moment.

I am free to listen in this moment, to dream in this moment, to see the beauty of creation in this moment, to be grateful for just such a moment as this – surrounded by people I love, light streaming in the windows, the sound of children among us – sharing our faith as friends on this journey.

These are the moments when God's plans begin to unfold in our hearts, ideas form in our minds, and dreams are dreamed.

These are the moments when we really can deny ourselves and take up the journey of the cross.

It is in the present moment that we can trust and move forward surrounded by the love and power of our Creator.

These are the moments when we can imagine Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, calling all of us to take up our own journey, to deny ourselves and take up the journey of the cross of new life, hope and love.

These are the moments that give us strength to deny ourselves and walk with Jesus in paths of love and service.

Amen.