

Lent 2

Mark 8:31-38

2/25/18

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Pt 1:2)

Mark 8:31-38

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What do you do to prepare? I guess that would depend on what you're preparing for, wouldn't it? If you're preparing for a race, a marathon perhaps, you'd do a lot of training to build your strength and endurance to make it to the end of the race. If you're preparing for a test, you'd look over all the material, the different lessons, that are going to be on the test. If you're preparing to move, you'd get all the packing materials you need, maybe schedule a yard sale to clear out some of the unnecessary clutter. So, there are many things in life for which we need to prepare and many ways to prepare for all those life events.

Not only that, but you prepare for different situations in life. Kids go to school, they get a good education, to be prepared for a productive life as an adult. On your job there might be further training you have to take so you can better do your job. Preparation is important so you are better able and ready to face challenges and take opportunities in life.

Today we see how Jesus prepared to go to his cross. *Because He Knew He Was Going to Die*, Jesus prepared for his cross by teaching the disciples to be prepared for theirs.

This morning Mark takes us near the end of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus was beginning to face more public opposition from his enemies, so he was taking more time to teach his disciples privately than earlier in his ministry. Mark tells us, **"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this..."** Jesus was about to begin his final journey to Jerusalem. And he didn't sugarcoat the details of what waited for him there. No, he was very straightforward with his disciples, telling them about the suffering and cross that waited for him there. He wanted them to realize that there was no other way. He had to suffer to save. He had to take up his cross if he was to remove the guilt of our sin.

The disciples, on the other hand, wanted Jesus to take up a crown or a throne rather than a cross. Earlier Peter had clearly confessed that Jesus was indeed **"the Christ, the Son of the living God"** (Matthew 16:16). That was the common confession of the disciples, but they still didn't understand what that meant for Jesus. They figured since Jesus was God's Anointed One, he would one day restore Israel to great glory and honor. Even Peter didn't get it. Even Peter wanted glory without the cross. *"Surely there has to be a better way for God's promised Savior to save the world"*, Peter thought. At the same time, the prospect of Jesus' death ran counter to their own personal ambitions for the Messiah's kingdom. They thought they would receive high positions of honor in an earthly kingdom. But, if Jesus were to die, that would end all selfish, earthly hopes. So, during a lull while Jesus was teaching, Peter pulled him aside and started to rebuke him. *"Come on, Jesus! Enough of this talk of suffering. You're the Christ, you're the Anointed One. You don't need to die!"*

You wonder if the disciples were hoping Peter would convince Jesus to stop all this foolish talk, but none of them expected Jesus' reaction. He immediately rebuked Peter and called out the source of such a dangerous attitude. **"Get behind me, Satan!...You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."**

Wow! A little harsh there, Jesus! Did he really have to call Peter, Satan? Well, yes, he did. When Peter told Jesus, *"Shun the cross by all means!"* he became a tempter, a tool of Satan, standing in the way of God's plan of salvation. Jesus' cross was necessary. If there was no cross for Jesus, then there'd be no glory for you! If there was no cross for Jesus, then there'd be no forgiveness for you!

Now Jesus took up a more general topic. Because he knew he was going to die, Jesus wanted his disciples to understand the necessity of his cross. But also, Jesus needed to prepare his disciples to understand the necessity of their own cross.

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Jesus' words seem strange, don't they? **"He must deny himself..."** Deny myself? None of us would be so quick to admit that the whole aim of our lives is to get our own way, but from infancy on, doing everything we can to accomplish our own will comes very easily. *"I want this...I want that...I need this...I don't like that...If only I had this...If everyone would just do what I want..."* Think about how easily that comes to us! For example, I hate driving on Highway 6. It drives me nuts! You get behind someone going 45 mph, and the thought pops into my head, *"would you just get out of my way!"* Because in my mind, in our minds, everyone ought to bend over backwards for me! On a daily basis, what naturally comes first? Me. Jesus' command is difficult, then, because *I* have to take a backseat.

So, why deny self? Jesus said, **"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"** In the quest to gratify self, in the selfish quest for "me first," the devil wants your focus to shift from God first to my wants and desires. He wants to pull you so far away from God that you lose him, that you no longer live for anyone or anything but yourself. Now, denying self isn't easy. Denying self means recognizing when our wants run contrary to God's will. Denying self means struggling against the natural selfishness that comes so easily.

But Jesus wasn't done, **"If anyone would come after me...he must take up his cross..."** Jesus quite literally took up his cross, didn't he? He was preparing his disciples for that time when they would see him struggle to carry his cross. They would see him bend his will and his body underneath the punishingly heavy weight of the cross. Why would Jesus do that? Why did the almighty Son of God willingly endure such hardship, pain, suffering, and finally death? He did it for you. He did it because he loves you. He perfectly submitted himself to his Father's will, because you and I do not. He did it because you are so often selfish. He did it because you prefer to indulge yourself against God's will, rather than deny yourself to follow God's will in your life. He carried his cross and allowed himself to be crucified there, because it was necessary. There was no other way to remove the burden of your sin.

Now, after taking up his cross to save you, after allowing himself to be crucified out of unending love for you, Jesus calls you to follow him and take up your cross. Why the cross? Crosses are painful, they aren't easy to carry and the longer the distance carried, the tougher to carry. The cross comes into your life as a direct result of denying yourself. The cross comes into your life as a direct result of following Jesus. The cross Jesus calls you to carry is whatever suffering, whatever difficulty, may come into your life because of your connection to Jesus. The crosses that come to you may be ridicule for your faith.

The crosses you endure might be the difficulty you having in denying self what it wants or even the frustration inflicted on our sinful selves when we follow and obey God's commands and not our own desires.

So, why the cross? Why can't we just have it easy in life? What good could possibly come from carrying the cross, from enduring hardship and difficulty? Our crosses drive us back to God. Our crosses drive us back to the loving arms of the one who carried his cross all the way to his death for you. Jesus calls you to bear the cross because without the cross we would be wonder away from God, we would chase after any sinful desire that would come into our hearts. But the cross keeps us close to God.

But Jesus doesn't call you to carry your crosses alone. He calls you to follow him. He goes with you. He comes to you in his love and gives you his grace to help you bear your cross, to endure the struggle of denying yourself. He allows your crosses to come to bring you back to him.

There in Christ we find comfort amidst hardship, plenty amidst need, security amidst ridicule, peace amidst crisis, healing amidst pain, relief amidst pressure, and life amidst death. It is in Christ that we find the forgiveness and the strength to continue to carry the crosses he allows us to bear as Paul once said, **"I can do everything through him [Christ] who gives me strength"** (Philippians 4:13).

Jesus, because he knew he was going to die, prepared you to carry your cross. He prepares you for the difficulty and trouble that is sure to come into your life on this side of heaven. But he did so, because he also knew he was going to rise. Jesus, after he carried his cross for you, after he died for you and won your forgiveness and your place in heaven, Jesus was done with his cross. He died, but the story doesn't end there. It ends with life! Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus, because he knew he was going to die and rise again, prepares you for your cross so that one day you'll be done with yours too. His death on the cross and his resurrection three days later means you will share with him in the glory of heaven. Jesus calls you to carry your cross now, so that you don't wander away from him now, so that one day he can finally and fully take that cross from you.

On that glorious day, you will stand cross-free with all who faithfully follow Jesus to eternal glory. There in heavenly glory, we will sing of the glorious battle won for us, and we will praise the one who fought and won that battle for us – Jesus who bore his cross for us. Until then, we follow Jesus as he prepares us for heavenly glory, bearing the cross for him.

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy -- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord ... now and forevermore. (Jude 24-25)

Amen