

Matthew 16:21-28
St. Andrew's, Nogales

Rev. M. Lucie Thomas
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Jesus has been traveling with his disciples around Galilee and other parts of what we now call the Holy Land for about three years, preaching and teaching and healing. He has been gathering larger and larger crowds of men, women and children who come out of the towns to quiet places in order to hear Jesus' teachings and to be healed of many kinds of diseases.

Everything seems to be going really well for this itinerant preacher. It must be pretty exciting for his disciples to be part of what's becoming a movement. Just prior to today's story as the group arrives in the district of Caesarea Philippi Jesus stops to ask the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

And it is Peter who gets it. "You are the Messiah the Son of the Living God."

And Jesus blesses him, and tells him he will be the rock of faith on which the future will be built. But he also tells the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

And then there is a turn in the story as recounted by the writer of the Gospel of Mathew. "From that time on," he writes, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, ... and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

But Peter, bless his soul, won't stand for it and he rebukes Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." And what is Jesus' reply, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me." Peter loves Jesus and he wants to take care of him. He cannot see that suffering might be integral to Jesus' mission. He has succumbed to the temptation to think that our will is God's will.

Peter goes from being a rock told he is a rock of faith on which the future will be built, to a rock becoming a stumbling block to Jesus' mission.

Clearly Peter has a lot more to learn. So do the other disciples, At this point Jesus turns to teaching them rather than continuing to preach to large crowds of people.

And one of the things he needs to help them come to understand is that all will not be sweetness and light, that hard times are ahead and that he will not avoid suffering and death.

According to the writer of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus began his public ministry when he heard that John the Baptist had been arrested. And I believe at this point in his ministry he understands that the Roman rulers will perceive him as a threat and that therefore the Hebrew authorities may have mixed feelings about his ministry.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,” Jesus tells his disciples. Think of the imagery of that statement. He chooses the symbol of the cross, the Roman's instrument of death.

Suffering is part of the human condition, and being a disciple, a follower, of Jesus does not mean we will escape suffering, that we will not experience difficult times.

We want our lives to be full of God's blessings, joy and health and abundance. And there are churches that do preach such a gospel of prosperity. And yet Jesus teaches us that although God may well bless us those good things, God knows that in this messy world there is suffering and loss, and pain and death, and that God will accompany us through those hard times also.

And if we truly want to follow Jesus, we too, must follow Jesus into the world and become vulnerable with those whom we serve. We

need to take the risks Jesus did in not only proclaiming God's reign on earth, but also following Jesus in living out that promise. We are called to fully enter into life in this world, as Jesus did, and bear witness to him in both joy and suffering.

Paul in his letter to the members of the Christian church in Rome tries to sum up the implications of God's grace for the way in which we live our lives, both as individual Christians, but also as a community of faith.

In just thirteen verses he comes up with over twenty items, way too many to preach on in one Sunday. We would really need to take a Sunday to cover each of the topics.

But one of the things that many of his suggestions have in common is to challenge us to live not according to the social conventions of our day, but to higher standards, overcoming evil with good, loving our enemies, offering hospitality to strangers.

And above all Paul calls us to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer.

Amen.