

Carrying Our Cross

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St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
Lent 2, Year B
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Mark 8:31-38

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me..."

It's an exciting time in the Szczerba household these days! My wife Marissa and I are expecting our first child. We are in the thirty fourth week of the pregnancy and are getting closer and closer to the due date of April 4th. Our new baby boy will be in our arms before we know it. People keep saying to us, "It will change your lives!", or "I can't wait for you to experience that love." The joyful expectation is real. We can't wait to be parents. It's something we talked about since we began dating over ten years ago. We also can't wait to have this baby in the community of St. David's. There is no better place to be at a time like this in our family's life. We are overwhelmed with joy and happiness as we look to that April 4th due date.

However, I would be remiss not to mention what it took for us to get to this point. We were told over two and a half years ago that the best chance we had at being parents was through in vitro fertilization, better known as IVF. Over these two and a half years, there's been a lot of pain and sadness. There's been immense frustration, many times that we have said to God, "Really? Why is this so difficult? Why us?" We never thought that starting a family would be so difficult. We never thought that this would be part of our story. There have been an infinite number of doctors appointments, and medications that Marissa has had to endure in order for us to bring new life into this world. It hasn't been an easy journey. So, for me to be standing in this pulpit, and telling you that we are pregnant is somewhat of a miracle. It's been by the grace of God that we will be parents.

In today's Gospel passage from Mark, Jesus told his disciples that he would undergo great suffering, be rejected, and then killed. This came as a shock to his disciples because suffering, rejection, and death were not on their agenda for Jesus. It's the throne of David they were after, so that would involve ruling nations with power and might. They signed on for a crown, not a cross. That is why Peter rebuked Jesus! Peter and the disciples were blinded by their own preconceptions, they had their own thoughts on what the Messiah's agenda would be, and it prevented them from seeing what Jesus' agenda must be. For Jesus, it was always the cross, and never a crown.

Suffering, rejection, and death was always part of Jesus' story. Because without them, there couldn't be a chance for resurrection. There couldn't be new life, and that new life is also part of Jesus' story. This is the good news for us, as Jesus said in our gospel, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Our suffering, our cross, is also a part of our story. As Christians we are not exempt from pain; Jesus wasn't. But as Christians, we have Jesus who showed us that new life is possible when we hand our pain and suffering to him. To deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus, requires that we admit we can't carry the burdens of life alone. It's not an easy thing to admit that the difficulties of life are too much. Letting go and letting God is not an easy task. It's quite herculean actually. It takes a lot of faith and trust in God.

In our passage from Genesis this morning, we heard the story of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, that they will be fruitful and will be the ancestors of a multitude of nations. The snippet we hear this morning is mostly filled with good news. It's a story that has a lot of faith and trust in God. However, it neglects to tell us the story of pain and suffering that Abraham and Sarah endured. Sarah was barren until she was 90 years old. Her infertility was part of her story, the suffering she went through, makes God's good news and covenant with her and Abraham even more important. Because even God's chosen leaders underwent immense pain and suffering of their own. And although Abraham and Sarah walked a difficult road God never left their side.

For Marissa and myself, we didn't think that IVF would be part of our story. In a way, we were blinded like the disciples, to the notion that the pain and suffering we heard about that came with infertility could be us. I tell you this story because I know that we all carry our own crosses. I know that we all walk along this journey we call life, trying to figure it out. Well, let me tell you that you don't have to walk alone. You have each other, this community of St. David's wants to walk with you. So, maybe letting go and letting God requires us to lean into that love, handing the suffering and pain over to God. We are a Christian community acting as the hands and feet of God in the world. So, when that cross is too heavy, lean a little closer to your friends in Christ. Lean into the groups and ministries that bring you closer to God.

Here we are on the second Sunday in Lent. A season of penitence and fasting in preparation for Easter Day. A time in the church calendar where we think about our mortality, when we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. It's a season to spend a little more time with God. Lent is a time to bring our pain and suffering to God. We all have our own crosses to bear and these forty days is the time to allow God to help us carry them.

Jesus wants to help us, he wants to walk alongside us in our darkest moments. Marissa and I have felt that along our journey. Our friends and families have been pillars of love and support. We've also loved being at St. David's for the last year and a half during our journey. It's been a place of joy and safety for us and we are forever grateful. This place is healing. The love of God is in it. My prayer for all of you during this season of Lent is that you let that love enter your lives because the yoke is easy and the burden is light when we believe in God in Jesus Christ.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to worship with the community of St. James School in West Philadelphia for their Friday eucharist. Their worship space was crowded with students, teachers, and visitors like myself. There was a lot of joy in that worship space. The worship was straight from the Book of Common Prayer, the same book we use today for our worship. However, they added small modifications that are specific for St. James School, and are really part of their identity as a faith-based educational community deeply rooted in transformative loving relationships.

My favorite modification was made to the Prayers of the People. The student read aloud the prayers that were listed in their program, but then provided space for the congregation to add their own prayers. The prayers said aloud began by saying either, "Please God" and then the petition, or "Thank you God", and then the petition. Almost every student participated. Some of the prayers uttered in that space were: Please God, help my grandmother who is sick. Please God, help me with my math test later. Thank you, God, for the community of St. James School. Thank you, God, for my friends and family.

As I left church that morning at St. James, I couldn't help but say, "Thank you, God." The refrain was echoing in my head. I said, Thank you, God, for this gift of new birth for me and

Marissa in the form of a child. Thank you, God, for helping us carry this cross. Thank you, God, for the community of St. David's. Thank you, God, for the people that sit in these pews. Please God, help us grow closer to you, help us carry our crosses during this season of Lent. Thank you, God.