

## **Sermon – Proper 17 – St Mary’s Lake Ronkonkoma**

### **Matthew 16: 21-28**

In the extensive news coverage of the terrible devastation in southern Texas, there has been a lot of comment that the flood is unprecedented. People who have been living in the affected areas for decades said floods never have threatened them in the past and therefore had no reason to assume they would be threatened this time either. We know now the past is often not a predictor of the future. Many of the displaced are in shock and confused having lost so much in such a short period of time.

In the aftermath of Super Storm Sandy many people in our area also felt shocked and confused. I was living at General Seminary and I remember waking the next morning and walking down to the Hudson River Park and seeing the 3-4’ flood line on the sides of buildings and people hauling material from their basements. It took a good amount of time to fully comprehend what had happened overnight.

Each day we place a lot of emphasis on certainty. Certainty that we will be safe and be well, certainty that our homes will afford a kind of sanctuary and that we will go about our daily routine as normal. These large natural disasters demonstrate to us just how uncertain the world around us can be. We fool ourselves if we think nothing major will ever happen to us or to those we know and love. Even with the greatest faith in God we are not immune from these life-changing events.

The human spirit does not generally like uncertainty. It is an uncomfortable place to be. It is stressful. If we lose our job or get very sick the future often retracts to days and weeks, rather than months and years. The adjustment to finding a new stasis, a new balance takes time. We are forced to reassess our lives, to make adjustments and to develop new plans. We seek out certainty because it’s a very human trait.

In last week’s gospel reading you might recall that Jesus posed a question to the disciples asking them “who do you say the Son of Man is?” Most of the disciples responded with the name of one of the dead prophets. Then Jesus asked them specifically who they thought he was. Peter spoke up with certainty saying that Jesus was the messiah, the Son of the Living God.

The spirit of God had allowed Peter to be made aware of this fact. He became more and more conscious that Jesus was more than a prophet, he was the long hoped for messiah. It wasn’t Caesar who was going to save them it was Jesus. It was Jesus that they needed to put their hope in and upon which to build their community.

In Peter’s mind he knew what the messiah was and so rightfully expected Jesus to do what the messiah was supposed to do. Peter and the others had been educated that the messiah was to come to overthrow the occupiers and restore the kingdom of God. They knew that this would take a mighty act of power as the Roman occupying forces were entrenched and well armed. But then things changed.

Jesus told the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem. Once there he says that he is to be taken into custody and will suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, and this will lead to his eventual death. However, he also says that he will be raised on the third day. This was the first of four times Jesus would speak these words.

This was all too much for Peter. He had just received a gold star for correctly stating that Jesus was the messiah. Now everything that he thought would happen, all his expectations of the messiah were stripped away by the very man he now understood to be the messiah. What confusion and whiplash he must have experienced.

Peter did what most of us would do and he pulled aside the subject of his uncertainty so as to have a quiet word with him. “What the heck are you saying?” he might have said. This is not how this is supposed to go. You Jesus are the messiah, the new king. You have unlimited power. How can you say to us that you will soon suffer and be killed?

Jesus would have none of it. “Get behind me Satan; you are a stumbling block to me.” This strong statement masks a great deal of uncertainty that Jesus also had. Jesus did not want to go down this road to his death. If you remember he prays to God his Father to allow the cup to pass from his lips. But he does accept that if this traumatic journey is his father’s will then he will agree. Who amongst us would look forward to being abused and then facing death by crucifixion?

The stumbling block that Peter becomes is the temptation to turn away from doing what God has ordained. Satan is after all the ultimate tempter and always seeks to encourage us to turn away from God. Why should you undergo such suffering when there might be another way, a less painful and powerful way Satan might say. Peter has unwittingly hit upon the weakest point of Jesus resolve and played to Satan’s strongest card.

Jesus knows that Peter is speaking out of his human wisdom. He knows that Peter has not considered that God might have a different plan for the world. The certainty Peter found in his knowledge of the messiah, and what the messiah’s coming would mean for the world, evaporated in the face of God’s plan, a plan that would supplant all others. Jesus the innocent lamb was to be separated from the flock, singled out to be killed by the state at the insistence of the religious leaders. This man had proved wiser, more just and more loving than them and had threatened their status by pointing out their hypocrisy. He was a threat that had to be neutralized.

Like Jesus, God has a divine plan for each of us. If we are open and willing, the Holy Spirit will reveal God’s plan to us. Discernment around what constitutes God’s plan is difficult and filled with uncertainty. Our lives can be upended, our families can exclude us and we can suffer in new ways.

Ask anyone who has felt called to ordained ministry about his or her discernment experience. Many get traumatized, many get frustrated and impatient, many get disappointed that what they longed hoped for does not pan out. Life gets put on hold, sometimes for years. It requires

an extraordinary amount of trust and faith just to stay committed. That cross that we carry can feel at times mighty heavy.

When we become a Christian our spiritual journey is informed by what God has in store for us, our truth, and requires us to change our lives. It is through this change that we learn how we are being encouraged to take up our cross and to follow Jesus. For some people they see the cross as a burden. You might hear them say “this is my cross to bear” when they are describing a circumstance that is unpleasant. This amounts to a fatalistic understanding of God’s call and bears little resemblance to the good news of Jesus’ message. This person sees the cross through the power of death rather than through the power of the resurrection.

For those of us that see bearing our cross as a symbol of our faith, a symbol that we have put Jesus at the center of our lives, we might be able to give support to those that see bearing the cross as fatalistic. We might imagine at this time that many people in southern Texas are feeling that their new situation is a “cross that they must bear.”

Denying ourselves in favor of supporting our neighbors and our communities is at the heart of the gospel message. We see this regularly in times of disasters. Life changes from a focus on self to a focus on others. In doing so we can help those with fatalistic thinking to turn to see the positive action of communal support as a divine plan, a plan where love overcomes fear, and justice dispatches injustice.

Jesus call for us to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow him will lead us to new and more fulfilling lives. Clement of Alexandria, one of the patristic fathers of the third century summarizes Jesus incarnation and death as a powerful affirmation of the love of God for humanity and demands that humanity demonstrate a corresponding love for God. This love for God above all else is our cross.

Clement says, “for Christ come down, for this he assumed human nature, for this he willingly endured the sufferings of humanity, that by being reduced to the measure of our weakness, he might raise us to the measure of his power. And just before he poured out his offering, when he gave himself as a ransom, he left us a new testament: “I give you my love (John 13:34). What is the nature and extent of his love? For each of us he laid down his life, the life which was worth the whole universe, and he requires in return that we should do the same for each other.” (McGrath p332)

Amen