

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## QUESTIONS

**The Rev. Andrew F. Kline**

Text of a Sermon preached on the Second Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2021

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16 | PSALM 22:22-30

ROMANS 4:13-25 | MARK 8:31-38

Last Sunday our nation observed the arrival at the milestone of 500,000 officially dead from COVID. I did spend some time in silence, meditating on the image of 500,000 candles lit on the back steps of the White House. Of all the stories I have heard over this past year that marks just one of those 500,000, I am most moved by those who were struggling with something else, but suddenly succumbed to COVID. Those who were careful, but had just one contact that put them at risk. Those who went into the hospital for one emergency, or one routine visit, but never came out.

We have such a friend in our midst, I'll call her P, who has been struggling with cancer for years, and beating the odds. Right now she is fighting for her life, not getting better, just slowly getting worse. After weeks in the hospital she has landed in ICU because the virus has complicated things just enough. She fights on.

Maybe she is joining us right now. She has heard Jesus tell his disciples, for the first time, that things are going to change. He is going to suffer, and be rejected, and shamed by the violent power of Rome. Killed. He is going to die. The good times are over. So, spiritually, they too must die. For the sake of the gospel, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him wherever it leads. Peter objects. Peter must learn better.

As strange as these words may sound to us now, at some point, in every Christian life, they become the shining doorway, the crux of the matter. You must lose your life in order to find it. No one else can tell you what this means. Deny yourself. Take up the challenge of being rejected, of being shamed for doing what God wants, of suffering for what is right, and you will find the path that leads to your life.

What does God want? God wants you to live a life of faith for others. God wants you to see your life as a part of that story of his people, beginning with Abraham and ending today with the next chapter in your life.

As Paul tells us, we are counted righteous by faith alone. That faith looks a little bit different for each of us. That faith is part of a very long story. It is an ongoing story. As Paul says, faith is what unites us to the force “that gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that are not.”

Faith appeared first in Abraham, who believed God's promise of a homeland and descendants for a generation – without seeing the signs of it. When Abraham was ready to settle, give in a little, give up, faith blossomed. God knew that Plan A was really Plan B. God changed some names. God said to Sarah, now it is time for you to believe. This big faith, this long bet, finds its most fertile ground in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As we follow Jesus there, we discover there is land for us, a family for us, an inheritance of eternal life for all the tribes of this earth.

You must take up your cross and follow me. You must lose your life to find it. These words may have been twisted by those in power to be an imposition of senseless suffering and cynical injustice. But for every person who wants to follow Christ, the meaning can only be won by walking through the door. These words are for you, when your life is on the line.

We could ask it more generally. What is killing us right now? Cancer? COVID? Climate Change? Capitalism? Affluence? Apathy? Fear?

No doubt we are dying from compound illnesses. A diet that keeps us from moving and breathing. Jobs that don't pay a living wage. Greed that keeps us from sharing. Ignorance that turns us inward and makes us suspicious of others.

It is striking that the humble mask shows up in our time as a symbol like the cross. Sometimes it stands for humility, sometimes for shame, sometimes for rebellion, sometimes for enforced conformity.

Ultimately, we must be more specific. Let us return to the side of our friend P's hospital bed. Her life is on the line. By definition, Jesus is there in her struggle, carrying his cross. Because she is a Christian, she is also with Jesus, beneath his cross, but also carrying her own. We remember, because Jesus is there, she is not defined by this moment. Her cross is not her disease. Her cross is not her suffering. What is her cross?

Perhaps her cross is the shame she feels for being so helpless, for having to fight each day to feel the dignity that God gave her by birth and baptism. Perhaps she denies herself by not complaining, by constantly showing her family that she knows she is loved. Perhaps, from her sickbed, she prays and gives to others, and is actively doing what she can to leave this earth a better place. That is all that God asks of her. For the sake of the gospel. That is all that God asks of us.

Friend, Jesus is asking you to pick it up your cross and follow him. What are you holding on to that might as well be let go of? What embarrassment, what denial of your privilege would help others see God's goodness. If not from a hospital bed, but from where you stand right now, how can you insist that God is good despite all the evil and suffering in the world. What would you give - what can you give - that others can have life?

Today, we may have only questions. But they are the questions that will get us out of our seats, and on the road toward home. God wants you to see your life as a part of the story of his people, beginning with Abraham and ending today with the next chapter in your life.

We are counted righteous by faith alone. As Paul has told us today, faith is what unites us to the force “that gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that are not.” Amen.