

Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2021, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church – Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ - Rector

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

"Follow the Leader"

It is so very encouraging whenever we hear that first reading from Genesis 22 when Abraham was told, through blind faith, to go to a place that God would show him and sacrifice his only son, the one that God promised that all generations would come from – he was the son of promise. Somehow he knew, through faith, somehow God would let Isaac walk away from that place that day, but first he had to take him there, and he had to bring him to the top of that mountain. The mountain that would one day become the Temple Mount – where sacrifice after sacrifice took place. But, one sacrifice did not take place that day, the one of Isaac, because the Angel of the Lord appeared at the last moment and said Abraham, Abraham, do not lay a hand on the boy for now I know that you have not withheld your only son from me and God. Powerful! Sacrifices – God made the ultimate sacrifice in letting His Son not be bailed out at the last moment. He took up His cross, and He gave Himself.

In today's Holy Gospel, Jesus invites people to make a different kind of sacrifice - in order to follow Him: *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"* (Mark 8:34-36) (Matthew 16:24) In Luke 9:23 Jesus adds the word *"daily"* to *"take up his cross."*

Have you ever wondered what Jesus means when He says, *"take up your cross?"* The apostles do not know that Jesus will be crucified. This takes place about a week before His crucifixion, when they were up near the Transfiguration, up near Caesarea Philippi. They have no clue what is ahead of them. When you think of the cross don't you usually think of the hard wood that Jesus was nailed to? There are so many people who just do not realize the terrible thing that the cross is. Crosses make great jewelry and are often used as symbols of our religion or our faith. Some people wear them, sadly, as good luck charms, believe it or not. There are those wear big silver crosses with big silver chains around their neck but you know by their language that they certainly do not have any respect for the cross.

In the first century, the Romans used a cross as the most cruel instrument of torture, ridicule and execution. They would crucify a person by a road, so that people say, on their way to or from Damascus, would see this person on the cross and ridicule them, because they knew that they done something wrong or had been accused of doing something wrong. How terrible to be nailed to a cross. How very ironic that the very symbol at the forefront of Christianity is the thing which brought death to Jesus, and the death which bought us our freedom from sin and death! It was a very painful, physical, and excruciating death. Whether you were tied to the cross or nailed to the cross, you were hung out to dry, basically. You were going to be there until it was all over. If we choose to follow Jesus, then His way must be our way. That is what He means by it. The Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1 tells us to present our *"bodies a living and*

holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” When Jesus says “*follow Me*” – His way has got to be our way!

There are some Churches that advertise Christianity for what it can do for you, and how it can make things better for your lives – especially those who believe in what is called the “prosperity Gospel.” Jesus does not tell people to ‘*come and follow*’ Him because it will make their lives more comfortable – He never said it was going to be easy to follow Him, but He did tell us we will not be alone. He did not promise a luxury vehicle because of following a specific preacher, but because following Him will make their lives eternal and everlasting. You only have to look at John 3:16 and see the promises that are there because of believing in Jesus.

In essence, Jesus says, “that if you want to be My follower, to be My disciple,” don’t expect a life of complete happiness and freedom from pain. Has anyone here ever experienced pain? Or you know someone who is experiencing pain? I know that there are several people here that have loved ones that are going through some really hard times with pain – maybe not being able to get up from a chair without wincing. Pain is not fun, but Jesus took on pain for us – amazing! There are going to be days when you do not want to get out of bed because you feel crummy, because you cannot walk or talk. So, maybe it is a Saturday, you stay in bed. If it is a Sunday – look you came to church. You came here this morning, while you might have felt like I am just going to roll over for another ten minutes, but you made a commitment to yourself and to God that you would be here today. Maybe you are on Altar Guild or playing the organ, you might be a Deacon, or Lay Eucharistic Minister, maybe you are running the camera or maybe you are leading the worship service. Have you ever had a day where you just say “it is Sunday, it is sunny outside, it is going to be 80 degrees, I just want to go in the back yard and just chill? Like Abraham, he knew that he had to take Isaac up that mountain – it was not negotiable! You here came today, or you might be watching our service on video ministry because you want to be with the people that believe. You came to church, either physically, or electronically, and that is wonderful. You do what Jesus tells you to do. Jesus says, we can expect to die, and we might even die painfully. When Jesus tells us to take up our crosses - this is something that “we willingly have to do.” Let’s face it – Jesus did not just get put on the cross, He walked all the way up hill to Calvary, and when He got there, as weak and a hurting as He was, He willingly got on top of the cross. He laid down on the cross because the sacrifice had to be made. He did not say anything – He just got on the cross. Why? For you and me – as an example. Taking up our cross is not something that is done to us or for us. I have heard people speak about various ailments and problems that have happened to them saying that they have this as ‘their crosses to bear.’ I am sorry, but I have to disagree. Taking up our cross is something we must choose to do, willingly. Jesus chose to take His cross and give of Himself, and that is what we are being asked to do. Whatever it is we are to do it willingly. Remember, last week I told you that God does not tempt you – the enemy tempts you – and you willingly can say NO – leave me alone “get behind me Satan.” Didn’t Jesus say to Peter, “*get behind me, Satan*”? He wasn’t calling Peter Satan, but He was saying “don’t try it!” You have to choose to make a sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

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There is only one person who can and will help you through such a situation – and that is Jesus Christ – who will help you! How many times have I reminded you to just pray when you are dealing with a difficulty situation, “Help me Jesus?” And then follow up with “Thank you Jesus. I know that there are people here today and people who are watching that have shared with me that they have been through situations and all they had to do was speak to Jesus and they felt His presence and that He was with them helping to carry them through that situation. If we willingly sacrifice everything for God’s sake, we have taken up our cross. On the other hand, if we make promises to God and we do not give Him what we have promised, then we are no better than trying to have our cake and eat it too!

Just this past Wednesday night, I was teaching about conditional promises. The key word is “if.” You know ‘if you do this, then you will get this’ – we all do that. Cross bearing is not an option we can take or leave. It is not a conditional statement that is followed by choices or results. Let me give you an example. If you would follow Jesus, then you must take up your cross! It makes sense, really. If we would follow Jesus - we will go where He goes. Jesus says Follow Me – then we are to obey and follow Him! Loving the people Jesus loved – the hurting and the poor. Jesus lived His life filled with Integrity, Truth, Honesty and Purpose, and He continues to carry that out today – through many of the people who are here today and in churches around the world. Jesus knew what He had to do, and He was not afraid to make enemies in the process.

Here are some conditions to following Jesus – remembering that when Jesus told Abraham that he would be the father of many and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky – God knew that Abraham could not keep any part of the promises – but God kept every one of them!

- If you want to be a follower of Jesus? then take up your cross! (it is what will help put the kingdom ahead of yourself)
- If you are not willing to take up your cross, then please do not call yourself a follower of Jesus! And do not call yourself a Christian!
- If you are not willing to sacrifice everything you hold dear, then you have no business calling yourself a Christian, for then you are ashamed of Him.

Remember, if we are following Jesus then do not be afraid. There are well over 100 times that ‘fear not’ or ‘do not be afraid’ are in the Bible. ‘Fear not’ and ‘do not be afraid’ are usually spoken by angels when they appeared to people. Nobody said it was going to be easy. So, try to do what it says -do not be afraid – because - we have Him guiding us, we have Him leading us, we have Him giving us strength and in some circumstances – He is even carrying us. I just love that poem and picture called ‘Footprints in the Sand’ in which it comes down to Jesus saying, “there is only one set of footprints because I was carrying you!”

Anywhere we go - Jesus has gone before. Remember Jesus has overcome the world! He promises to guide and protect. Anything that happens to us, Jesus is standing there right

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beside us. And finally, when He does choose to end our journey, Jesus will be waiting for us to bring us home! All Jesus asks of us is this – give Him everything – meaning to give Him ourselves. Please do not worry about what is on the road up ahead. We have our security in Him – the One who died to set us free. Then my friends, you will be ready to do what Jesus asked of you – “follow Me.”

So, what do we have to give up following Jesus? The answer is simple – everything! What do we gain by doing so? The answer again is simple - everything.