

Sermon – Matthew 16:21-28

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Grace Lutheran Church

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“Found by the Lost Messiah”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Then Peter, the Rock upon whom Jesus would build his church, said, “Jesus, you have to be out of your mind! You’re the Messiah, the Living God! I just said that, and you just said I was right. So, what gives with all of this talk of suffering and death? What kind of Messiah are you?” I don’t know about you, but I’m with Peter. I don’t like suffering and I don’t like death, not for me and not for the people I love. Why would Jesus enter into suffering and death? If anyone could finally live out the fantasy of a life without suffering, surely it would be the Messiah. And just maybe, Peter might have imagined, Jesus will bring him along for the ride. But Peter’s confession of Jesus’ messianic identity is followed not by an invitation to a life of leisure but by Jesus’ first prediction of the Passion. The gospel narrative has reached a tipping point. Everything up to this moment has led to the declaration of Jesus’ identity. From this moment on, we learn what his identity means, both for Jesus and for us.
2. We wish to avoid suffering, but the simple reality is that we can’t. The world is too broken, and sin – around us and within us – is too powerful. Death is too real. Our news cycle this week has been driven by the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, and the violence that has unfolded in its wake. It seems like we’re trapped in a time loop. Violence begets violence, division begets division, and suffering deepens. Jeremiah’s words, spoken 2,500 years ago,

could have been from an op-ed this week: “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” We yearn for a different world, but this is the world in which we find ourselves. And this is the world, thank God, into which Jesus has come.

3. Jesus declares not simply that he will go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, but that he *must*. Christ did not leave his throne in heaven to be adjacent to our suffering and death, but to enter into it fully. Jesus enters this world of imperial oppression and religious hypocrisy bearing a message of love and forgiveness, and Jesus knows what these powers and principalities do to those who preach love and forgiveness. David Lose notes that “humanity’s likely response would be to reject the message and kill the messenger.” Jesus knows where his preaching will lead him; it is why he has come. In Jesus, God enters fully into our suffering, even unto death on a cross. He stands in solidarity with the suffering, dies in love with the dying, to show forth just how much God loves this world. To create a new world in which death is not the end; that on the third day he will rise, and in him so shall we. Our salvation comes not from our own power or strength but from the lifeblood of the Savior who suffers on the cross, the Christ who empties himself for the sake of the world.
4. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and he invites us to follow. Peter’s protests are met with a sharp rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan!” A moment ago, he was the rock; now he’s just a stumbling block standing between Jesus and his mission. Jesus puts Peter back in his place; he calls Peter to follow him. You can’t follow Jesus from the front; you have to get behind him. As he walks toward the cross, he beckons us to follow. It is a journey into suffering and death, yet it is the only way we will find our life. Losing our lives in Christ, we receive new life as a gift.

5. This does not mean we should seek out suffering as if it is itself redemptive. Suffering should not be spiritualized, as if it's a good thing that people are dying from COVID-19 or suffering from virulent forces of racism and oppression. Instead, we are called to deny ourselves and follow Jesus into the suffering that exists, standing with those who suffer and seeking to alleviate their pain. As we follow, we go not with guns drawn but with patience, perseverance, and genuine love. As Paul writes to the Romans, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." This flies in the face of human wisdom and makes no sense as long as our goal is self-preservation. But our lives are hidden in the sign of the cross; the empire's instrument of oppression and death which has become for us the sign of life. So, we pick up the cross and follow Jesus into the rough places of this world, knowing that as we follow him, he walks with us. "We can," Liddy Barlow writes in *The Christian Century*, "lose the lives we've known, with their glib answers and careful plans and find a new life over which we have no control, trusting that Jesus too went forward on a way full of peril and mystery. We follow him not out of masochistic delight in pain, nor from a grim abstinence from comfort. Instead, we risk sacrifice and trouble because we trust God is present in these divine things – and that the life we find there will be the only life worth having."
  
6. Jesus says that "there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." Perhaps this reflects the early church's belief that the resurrected Christ would return soon from heaven. But perhaps not. For nowhere in this world is the Kingdom of God more clearly seen than in the last place we'd ever look for it, in the self-giving love of Jesus on the cross. In the losing of his life, your life has been found. You now bear on your brow the cross of Christ, imprinted in the waters of baptism that connect you to our risen Lord. Your old life is forfeit, and your new life cannot be taken from you. Not by suffering; not by sin; not by death. You are forgiven, free, and alive. Get out of Jesus' way and follow him. Bring

the gifts of Jesus: hope to the hopeless, comfort to the oppressed, and life to this dying world. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.