

SERMON- Lent 2 (B)

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Romans 4:13-25

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

February 25, 2024

Mark 8:31-38

Psalms 22:22-30

OPENING:

I have a working theory that the best hymns in our hymnal... are the ones that are located in the 600's... in the BACK of the *Hymnal 1982*.

I am not an expert on hymnody by any stretch of the imagination, but I do have a list of my favorite hymns and they are almost all from the back of the hymnal.

I don't know if this because those are the ones that barely made the cut or whatever...

One of my favorites of those is our Opening Hymn, number SIX hundred seventy five, and, no doubt, you remember well that it was also the opening hymn for my Coronation back in November.

Just on that page, 675, you also have "There is a Balm in Gilead" and "God Moves in Mysterious Ways" and on the next you have "Surely it is God who Saves me."

"Take Up Your Cross, the Savior Said" is the name of today's opening hymn and Todd, of course, chose it because it echoes Jesus' words from our Gospel reading from Mark. Here Jesus issues this awesome and awful command to his disciples and to the crowd.

It's also often a hymn used for Good Friday so it acts a bookend for us in Lent here and at the end of our Lenten journey. Today, let's use it then as a signpost for our time together.

HYMN/ GOSPEL

Upon hearing and singing the hymn, and hearing and reading Jesus' instructions in our Gospel...

They might *sound like* this is a pep talk for Peter and the gang. It comes at this hinge point in the Gospel where Peter has just made his Confession and Jesus makes his 1st Passion Prediction, predicting his death. Jesus then rebukes Peter and finally he kind of gets them in the huddle and gives them this pregame speech which is powerful and inspiring.

Indeed, scholars have found that Mark **is indeed** drawing on military language, a sort of pre-Battle rallying discourse.

Jesus kind of sounds like a recruiter, like Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt, like an Old Testament warrior prophet ready to slay some Canaanites,

or like a 1st century Jewish messianic leader trying to summon his fellow Jews to fight back against Rome.¹

And we *can* hear Hymn #675 “Take Up Your Cross, the Savior Said” in that way too, as if we are gearing up to face our Lenten disciplines during the season, or as if, at my Coronation, I was gearing up to face the challenges of serving as your 20th Rector.

I can’t think of any image more powerful than this one, that we need to place a wooden cross on our back, like the martyrs of old, and like Jesus, prepare to go to our death.

That’s a tall order (however you metaphorically stretch what your “cross” might be). BUT... with coaches and generals like Jesus, and with hymns like this, we can do it... we can summon the energy and the strength to walk the Calvary walk, and we can imitate our Savior in his journey to the Cross.

OR CAN WE? Is that what Jesus and the hymn are actually saying?

LENT:

There is a good meme floating around on the old internet and it’s about Lent and our Lenten practices and what we are giving up

It reads:

“This Year, for Lent, I give up.”²

I think it’s meant in a cynical way, as in Lent is too much a burden in an overly busy life, but I think it can also be understood in a deeper way, in a way that actually does correspond to Jesus’ call for how we live out our discipleship.

There is this upside-down logic that Mark and the hymn writer are employing that should be paid attention to.

We are supposed to lose in Lent. We are supposed to not be able to carry the burden.

We cannot diet our way out of Lent, we cannot prayer walk, or journal or summon our energies in order to avoid our vices and our sins.

We don’t retreat into the wilderness to do pushups and read Scripture, or what have you...

in the hope that we can return to the world (and God) by Easter, with ourselves all polished up enough to make “Best in Show.”

¹ Myers Ched. 2008. *Binding the Strong Me: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*. (20th Anniversary Ed.) Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 245-6

² [Martin Family Moments: Holy Cow it's Holy Week](#)

Instead, we go there into the wilderness to meet God, to understand that Jesus will bear that cross for us.

That's what I think the hymn is saying.

We hear the bold Imperative, this command to take up your cross, but notice the rest of the language, the words used in the verses:

“Humbly”, “weight”, “weak”, “alarm”, “brace”, “nerve”, “shame”, “foolish”, “death.”

That's us.

Then notice who is actually doing the carrying:

Verse 2 mentions “HIS Strength”, meaning Jesus’

Likewise, verse 4 repeats “HIS strength,” again meaning Jesus’.

We need to hear this idea of surrender, of self-emptying, of abdication, of dying so we might rise, of losing so we might win.

That's what Mark's Jesus is saying.

“Mark is introducing the essential paradox of the Gospel.”

“Mark is not goading his followers on to military heroism. (Instead) By resisting violence, disciples continue to shatter powers and to refuse their authority.”³ Like so much of Mark, he is parodying the existing power structures to mock them, to reveal their hollowness and inadequacies and to point to something greater.

That's harder actually, then signing up to carry a cross. Peter understood this.

That's why he goes apoplectic in our reading. He is saying:

Let me charge the barricades, let me take the hill. Anything other than this ignominious defeat.

We have trouble hearing it too. We go apoplectic

And say:

Let me do the juice cleanse, let me memorize scripture, or swear off swearing

GRACE:

Instead, it's by grace that Abraham, the great figure of the Old Testament, is saved.

It's by grace that Peter, the great human figure of the New Testament is saved.

Grace is getting what you don't deserve.

Everyone loves Grace, it's a very warm and fuzzy word, like “Faith.” we just don't like the “alone” part... We want to share in the effort, and just to make sure make it

³ Myers, 247.

like 50-50 us and God, or maybe 75-25 just to be sure. Or maybe 99 to 1
We want to follow that great piece of Scripture.
“God Helps those who help themselves.” The only problem is, that’s not in the Bible and, if it is, we are screwed.⁴

RITE I

This is a time for us to go into Lent, and figure out we cannot live by ourselves. That we will fail. Hope that Jesus will save us.

It’s hard. It takes spiritual judgement and discernment and prayer.
I for one struggle with it. I find myself trying to gloss over the difficulties of Lent and rescue us from our exile.
Awkward if you are a newcomer, you have caught us in LENT, where we keep talking about our wretchedness.

That’s why I have to do Rite I for all of us, all 3 services. My essential optimism and sunniness will try to keep us from Lent.

Ash Wednesday does its work at the beginning.
For Wednesdays, we begin our Healing Eucharists with the Penitential Order, frontloading the Confession and our “Manifold wickedness.” And all throughout this service, we get the heaviness of the old-school Elizabeth language.

The intent there is just jostle us enough that we think about things in a different way.
Bringing it back to the Hymn, as I close. I mentioned that these instructions from Jesus were upside-down logic.
When Paul preaches in Acts, the complaint is indeed that they are turning the world upside-down
Not to make it too graphic.
The disciples took that to heart. They did “Take up the cross” and they followed Jesus. Not in his life but in theirs. Andrew crucified sideways. Peter crucified upside down.

AMEN

⁴ Like so much of what I preach, this sermon is heavily informed by Mockingbird Ministries, specifically the *Same Old Song Podcast* for Lent 2 (B) [Same Old Song: Lent 2 \(B\): Sometimes Darkness Can Show You the Light \(fireside.fm\)](https://www.fireside.fm/s/16111111/episodes/16111111-16111111-16111111)