

Sermon
The Second Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 25th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16; PSALM 22:22-30;
ROMANS 4:13-25; MARK 8:31-38

Some of you may have heard me share that I suffer from a bit – ok, more than a bit! – of spatial disorientation. This is particularly obvious when I have to read a map. When I look at a map I experience a profound sense of disorientation. I see colours and shapes. Squiggly lines. I know that North, South, East and West are a part of it, but North is *never* where I think it should be on the page. When I look at a map I am overwhelmed with not really knowing what I am looking at...

We find this thread of disorientation in the Gospel passage we've just heard. What must it have been like for the disciples to hear these words from Jesus? I feel like they might have experienced something like the disorientation I feel when I look at a map. Consider what had shaped and informed the disciples. Their world was all about outside, physical, tangible, measures of worth and meaning. Life was "mapped out" in clear, concrete terms. Until Jesus begins to speak to them about his suffering and death, I imagine that they thought they were still following the map they'd always known. They thought they were looking at the Messiah they had been waiting for when they looked at Jesus. The map they thought they were looking at led to confrontation, and a power struggle, and victory for Jesus, and for them by association. To hear from Jesus that he was to suffer and die would have been bewildering. Disorienting. Then in the middle of that disorientation, Jesus says to them that they are to take up a cross and follow him. If the idea of suffering and death was bewildering, being asked to take up a cross, to them a powerful sign of Roman oppression, an instrument of torture, a symbol of vulnerability and humiliating death, would have been even more disorienting. It would have been unthinkable for them to choose to take up a cross. Their lives – their maps – had been shaped by scripture passages like the one from Deuteronomy that says

that anyone hung on a tree is cursed by God. Jesus is turning things upside down. He is joining what they associate with being cursed – the cross – with blessing. He is joining suffering with salvation. He is joining death with life – all things that would not have been linked in the minds and on the maps of the disciples. What Jesus is saying can't be clearly laid out and captured on a page.

This is just as bewildering for us today as it was for the disciples. Just as confusing and disorienting. To look up from what we feel certain about – what we see clearly, what can be mapped out with bold strokes and bright colours – is difficult. To admit that we can't see it all, and that we don't always know what we're looking at is bewildering. To look into the eyes, and into the hearts of those around us can be disorienting. We have to be willing to look up from our maps to do this, and it's not easy. This is what "taking up our cross" can mean, today.

Cynthia Bourgeault – Episcopal priest, writer and modern day mystic – makes the case that Jesus isn't just the Saviour of the world: here to die and be raised to new life for us, as we've primarily come to emphasize in Western Christianity. Jesus is also a wisdom teacher – one sent to dwell among us to perk our consciousness that we might come to know how to live. One sent to dwell among us so that we might know how to pattern our lives and how to enter into a new mode of perception.

Jesus's message and his earthly ministry were about relationships – a new kind of relating and relationship. Jesus's message is about a way of being in the world. A posture, a stance. It's a way of open arms and eyes and hearts. It is a new mode of perception – one that has us pay attention to connections and intersections and honour those connections everywhere.

Richard Rohr describes Jesus as having lived in a way that is not about balancing the opposites that are part of our earthly existence and our humanity, but about holding both. Rohr sees this in the cross: Jesus was willing to hold it all and he doesn't balance it, he suffers it. He holds it until it transforms him,

and we call this resurrection.¹ Taking up our cross can mean this: being willing to be disoriented as we look up and into eyes and hearts and differences and opposites in our world, and being willing to be stretched as we hold those opposites. Recently I mentioned the assertion that Sam Wells makes that there are three answers to every question: “yes”, “no” and “it depends” and the answer is almost always “it depends”. “It depends” asks us to suspend judgement and to be willing to consider that there is more to it. Taking up our cross can mean being transformation – and resurrection, new life – found in asking questions and being willing to be stretched as we answer “it depends”.

In our passage from Genesis this morning we hear about God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says this about this passage:

“Faith is the ability to live with delay without losing trust in the promise; to experience disappointment without losing hope, to know that the road between the real and the ideal is long and yet be willing to undertake the journey. That was Abraham’s and Sarah’s faith.”

To live with delay while maintaining trust in God’s promises stretches us. To hold onto hope in the midst of disappointment stretches us. The road between the real and the ideal is long, and we are stretched as we walk that road, but God invites us to keep walking, and to keep our eyes, hearts, hands and arms open, and willing to look for and honour the connections that are everywhere in our world. God invites us to keep walking with love.

In Lent, practices such as prayer, fasting and almsgiving are opportunities to look up from our maps and to live into connection. If we deny ourselves in a way that simply scratches a “vice” off the page – off the map – without living into looking up and around us, we have missed an opportunity. When we look up, it may be disorienting – we might not be sure what we’re looking at, or who we are seeing – but it is in this disorientation that we experience God’s grace. It is in this disorientation that we stretch and grow.

¹ I heard Richard Rohr speak of this on the podcast “The One You Feed” with host Eric Zimmer.

We have our Annual Vestry meeting after the service today. This is really a business meeting. We are required to fix our gaze on reports and figures, and to make decisions about budget and parish officers, but these are more than words and numbers on a page. These reports are an expression of the happenings – and of the heart – of this community. They are an expression of the ways we choose connection here in this place, and in the world. These figures are what support us in being community, in coming together to look up and into eyes and hearts each week.

May we all take up our crosses this Lent and be willing to be disoriented as we look up from what can be mapped out on a page and into eyes and hearts. May we be willing to honour the cross shapes in the connections and intersections that surround us in our world. May our posture, our stance, in the world have a cruciform shape as we journey with open hearts and open arms, and may we be willing to be stretched as we live and move with love, in Jesus name. Amen.