

2nd Sunday in Lent – Year B – March 4, 2012 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on Mark 8:31-38 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Does Jesus meet your expectations?”

How about that Super Bowl game last month? It certainly met all the hype. And I know that sports fans are looking forward to the “March Madness.” Every year this tournament produces great games. And how about those storms that rolled through on Friday... they certainly met expectations, didn't they? Power was lost, two entire towns were wiped off the map... and people died. Not something that we expect. This was something the disciples had trouble dealing with in our story this morning - someone was going to die and that did not meet their expectations.

Jesus was in the final year of his 3 year public ministry. He was traveling to Jerusalem for the final time. While he is walking on the road with his disciples, a crowd of people following them, he stops to ask them, “Who do people say I am?” The teacher gives his students an opportunity to confess their faith. Peter, spokesman for the group, gives a bold and clear confession, “You are the Christ.” You are the Messiah, the one promised by the LORD. And you're not just an extraordinary human being, you are God's Son!

Jesus finds it necessary to go on and explain to them what they should expect from the Christ. This marks the first recorded time when Jesus openly and clearly says to them, “Here's the deal. Since I am the Messiah (as you rightly acknowledge), this is what you can expect from me. It is necessary that I go to Jerusalem, and while there, it is necessary that I suffer many things and be rejected by the religious leaders, I must be killed, and after three days I will rise again.”

These are not words they anticipated coming from the mouth of the Messiah. You see, the Roman government ruled Palestine. A garrison of Roman Soldiers was stationed right next to the temple, to impose Roman laws and collect Roman taxes. The Jews just wanted to be free, like they were before, with no one to rule over them but God. This is what they thought the promise of the Messiah was all about – a political and military Messiah. Their religious teachers had been teaching these things to the Jews. The disciples wanted the glory and the power of a political Messiah without all of the heartache – none of this nonsense talking about suffering and dying.

This is why Peter takes Jesus by the arm away from the circle of disciples, “Can we talk, privately? Lord, this must never be, stop talking this way!” Jesus had faced this temptation before. In the wilderness Satan said to him, “You can have the power and glory without the suffering.” Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get behind me Satan! You are thinking about earthly things - an earthly kingdom - not heavenly things.” Jesus was not what the disciples expected.

Jesus uses this as a teaching moment. He gathers the crowd in with the disciples and says, “This is what you can expect if you want to follow me, the Christ, the Son of God...” “If anyone would come after me, He must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” The cross of self-denial means to set aside my will to do the will of God. This is what God expects of me as his disciple.

What does that look like in disaster? My house is wiped out by a tornado, all my possessions are lost, friends are dead... do we blame God and cry out, "Why did you do this to me?" If we are Jesus' disciples the cross of self-denial says, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised!" The cross we bear embraces the Word of Christ even when sufferings seem to contradict his promise to help in every need. Would you be able to carry that cross? It's what God expects of you.

But disaster did not strike here in Radcliff. All of you are safe, your homes and the church are still standing. But aren't there other areas of life where tornados have touched down - where the warm air of your sinful desires collides with the cold front of self-denial?

What does carrying the cross look like as a single person? God expects you to respect his gift of sex that he has reserved for the marriage bed, which means not living together as if you were married. His will for you is to follow the example of Joseph in the Bible. In Genesis 39 you will read about Joseph. He was a stud. He could have had anything or anyone he wanted, and when the boss' wife tried dragging him to bed with her, he refused, (unlike what is portrayed on today's television sitcoms), and he said, "How could do such a wicked thing and sin against my God?" Is this the cross you are happily bearing as a single person?

How do we carry the cross in a marriage relationship? Jesus said, "A man will leave his father and mother be united to his wife, they will be one flesh." God means that the man and woman continue to be one flesh. He's not just talking about the sexual part of marriage, but the psychological and emotional oneness, the unity as husband and wife, working together, serving each other. In that relationship Jesus expects you to deny yourself – refuse to pay attention to what you want just for yourself... how well have we as husbands and wives done that?

Do we respect each other in the way we talk to one other? Do we build one another up or tear down? Do we consider talking with our spouse when a career change arrives, do we communicate about money management, do we hold on to past offenses? Or do we just do what's good for me?

As his disciple – a Christian... what does Jesus expect of me? He says to me, "Take up your cross and follow me. Even till death, do not be ashamed of me." Even when family is in town and they say, "We don't do church," we're supposed to choose Jesus over family? Sunday morning arrives and you can say, "That's fine, we're going to church and you're more than welcome to come. If not, we'll be back in an hour or so," or does family win out, because you're ashamed of Jesus and his Word? What does Jesus expect of you? That his Word wins out, yes, even over family. That is the cross of self-denial, to deny my will and the will of even my family to do God's will.

That is a heavy cross to bear. So often we are tempted to make Christianity easy, painless, and non-offensive. We just want to get to heaven without all this confrontation and hurt feelings. That is why the cross of self-denial is so difficult, because life would be better if everyone, even God, yielded to my will and did what I want.

“But what good is it,” Jesus asks, “if you never lose a friendship, if you never offend someone, if you obtain the whole world with all of its wealth and glory and power, what benefit is it to you. Because if those things are more important to you, then you’ll lose your soul and eternal life.” If you think these earthly things are more important, then you will be part of the crew that is rejected on the Last Day, the group that Jesus is ashamed to know, because in this life, you were ashamed to know him.

What Jesus expects of us is nothing more than what his Father expected of him – to deny himself and take up his cross, that is why he said with conviction, “I must go to Jerusalem, I must suffer, I must die... for them, because they have not taken their cross faithfully.” Jesus did what his Father expected of him, and he did it perfectly. The difference between Jesus’ cross and ours (both are necessary) – our cross is a natural consequence of being Jesus’ disciple, but it does not save us. Jesus’ cross saves.

The cross of Jesus was necessary because all of our sins had to be laid there. The alternative was that they be laid on us. Our failure to deny ourselves our sinful desires, our sinful pride, all of the times we acted according to what was best for me and me alone, those sins had to be laid on Jesus, and they were, at the cross. Because they were laid on Jesus the Father punished his Son. He let his anger out on him, not only through the physical torture of a crucifixion, but also through the emotional distress as God laid on him the guilt and anger over our sins. There God rejected his Son, because the alternative would be that he reject us. But he didn’t, and he hasn’t. That is why the cross was necessary. A punishment only Jesus could bear...

The cross was necessary, but Jesus also said, “I must be killed, but after three days rise again.” The empty tomb was necessary because it proves that the Father accepted what Jesus did on the cross. All payment for sins is complete! No more punishment or suffering for sins needs to happen. His work is done! The empty tomb was necessary because it gives us life, too.

Through the waters of holy baptism, the Father has given you all of the benefits of Jesus’ cross - the washing away of all of your sins, the Father accepting you as his child. Through the waters of baptism the Father has given you all the benefits of Jesus’ empty tomb – you can count on a resurrection of your dead body on the last day and life eternal in heaven.

What can we expect from Jesus? On Last Day when he comes with his angels in his Father’s glory, we can expect that he will not be ashamed of us. We can expect him to smile on us and say, “Set down your heavy cross of self-denial, and welcome to the everlasting joys of heaven, where you will serve me and your brothers and sister with perfect humility and selflessness!”

What does he expect of us now... while we wait? For now, we embrace the cross God has given us and thank him for it. Yes! We thank God for the privilege to practice self-denial. Because our cross makes us realize the necessity of Christ’s cross. Every time I want to drop my cross and do what I want to do and say, “This is too difficult!” I am forced to run back to Jesus and see what he did for me, and then I gladly go back and pick up my cross and follow his will, no matter how heavy that burden may be.

Jesus expects me to set aside my will and follow his. People are always asking, "What is God's will for my life? What does he want me to do?" His Word tell us! God's will is that the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity. His will is that all people be saved through the sharing of his Word. His will is that I lead a godly life – that I live according to his Word.

So what does that cross look like? When I lose everything to tornado or accident or illness, then I will set my will aside and say, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, may the name of the Lord be praised!" As a single person, you will set aside your will and follow the example of Joseph who was not ashamed to remain a virgin until his wedding night. As a married couple, we will set aside our personal agendas, we will freely admit our wrongs, we will freely forgive each other, we will respect and love and serve each other. As a disciple we will be not ashamed to introduce friends or family to Jesus at church and Bible study, and there may be times family is left at home while you leave to be fed by your Lord's Word and Sacrament.

But that is the cross of self-denial: setting aside my will and the will of others, even family, for God's will. This is what Jesus expects of us; it is what we want to do for him; it is what we will do for him - for him who carried the cross that saves. Amen.