

February 25, 2024 (Lent 2 B)

Mark 8:31-38

“It’s the CROSS – or it’s HELL.”

We generally think of **Jesus** as kind, compassionate, humble, gentle, loving, forgiving, and welcoming of ALL people – *and HE IS* – but, make no mistake, He is also tough, unyielding, strong, and harsh. His words in our Gospel Lesson for today are the latter, they are, quite frankly, a **punch in the face**. Before He turns His attention on us, however, He punches **Peter** in the face. Now Peter was feeling pretty good about himself before this event took place. Jesus had just asked the disciples *who* the people thought He was, then *who they* thought He was. Bold Peter was quick to stand up and proclaim, “*You are the Christ – the Promised Messiah / the Son of God / the Savior of the world!*” Jesus praised Peter for getting it right . . . then this happened: **Mark 8:31–38** (NIV)

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Ouch. I imagine the other disciples taking a bit of a step back from him. Last Sunday we heard how Jesus was led out into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by Satan. The Son of Man overcame them **all** by properly using the Word of God. The angels then came to attend our Lord and bring Him much needed food, water, and encouragement. We’re told that Satan left Him until a different opportunity would come along. Enter **Peter**. His own friend and disciple stood there as *Satan’s tool* to dissuade Jesus from going to the Cross. “*Never Lord – this shall NEVER happen to you!*”

Peter didn’t understand, but Jesus did. ***It’s the CROSS – or it’s HELL.*** Not hell for *Him*, but hell indeed for all humanity. This WAS the only way. This was the Plan all along – Isaiah 53 and Psalms 22 make that abundantly clear. Every Old Testament sacrifice pointed ahead to the Lamb of God who would shed His Blood as a Sacrifice of Atonement – and, without HIS Blood on HIS CROSS

there is no salvation for mankind. Without the CROSS of Christ all sinners (and we are ALL sinners) would wind up locked up with Satan for all eternity.

There are a LOT of people, even a lot of people who consider themselves Christians, ***who do not believe that.*** One of our people brought that up in our Bible class on Thursday. A friend says, “*All good and decent people* (whatever that means and according to what standard no one seems to know or care) *all decent people* (they say) *will go to heaven, regardless of what they believe.*” Sure – it’s tempting to believe that, and very popular nowadays – but . . . it’s a LIE of Satan. I can clearly and unequivocally say that because the God of the Bible (the One True God) and **Jesus Himself** tells us: ***It’s the CROSS – or it’s HELL.*** Besides, I don’t really care what’s popular out there – I’m going to stick with the Guy who rose from the dead and who told us in **John 14:6** “***I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***”

God set humanity straight. We’re ALL sinners. All sinners deserve hell. No sinner can get himself or herself into heaven. Jesus set Peter straight. The CROSS is the only way. The Cross alone can open the gates of glory. But . . . He’s not done *punching* yet. He’s got a *fist* for you and me too right here in the following verses (34-38):

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

HIS Cross was **redemptive** – it paid for the sins of all humanity and opened up the only Way to eternal life. Our crosses are certainly NOT redemptive. They pay for NO sins, nor do they need to, His cross paid for them ALL. They are, however, **constructive** and, in fact, they are absolutely necessary for anyone following Jesus home to heaven.

Here’s where we might have the audacity of Peter and try to take **Jesus** aside and **rebuke Him**: “*This just isn’t right Jesus! We’re*

not supposed to suffer and struggle! Salvation is fully bought and paid for in Your Cross – now I’m supposed to have a happy, healthy, fulfilling life without any serious trouble and where everything basically goes my way. I should get to sail smoothly right through life to eternal life! That’s how it’s supposed to go Jesus!”

“Get behind me Satan, you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men. All you care about are things down here and what YOU want. You can’t see the big picture, and you have no idea what’s even in your best interest – let alone what God’s plans truly are, especially on a global scale. Zip it.”

Ouch. A punch in the face. Peter needed it, and so do we. Jesus forgave Peter, and Jesus forgives you and me. The only reason He can is because He went to the CROSS and paid for all those sins. He didn’t give up on Peter, even though he would hit the ditch yet again, and it would even be worse. He doesn’t give up on you and me either – and He won’t give up on us – because He went to the CROSS and went through HELL to make us His sons and daughters and turn us into His disciples who are now following Him home to heaven.

Now He says to all of us – who walk after Him in repentant faith . . . ***It’s the CROSS for you too – or it’s HELL.*** “Yikes. OK Lord – it’s the CROSS – tell me about it, and what can I expect Lord – as I take up my cross and follow You?”

Well, first of all, let me tell you what the cross is NOT: It’s not all the things I suffer with down here because I’m a broken sinner living in a broken and dying world. It’s not my arthritis / my aches and pains / my health problems / my financial issues / my struggles with inflation, debts, and making ends meet / it’s not the trouble I have in my relationships because we’re all selfish sinners / it’s NOT the things common to all people whether or not they follow Jesus.

It is, on the other hand, the things we suffer that come as a direct result of following Jesus:

- It’s the sacrifices we make to have a church home / to worship, grow, and serve together as part of a Christian congregation.
- It’s the hatred, ridicule, loss, and pain we feel at the hands of those who hate Jesus.
- It’s speaking up when we feel pressure from others (and pressure from our own sinful self) to be quiet and blend in.

- It’s being quiet when our sinful self wants to yell and scream to get what we think we deserve.
- It’s the **denial of SELF** – in order to be men and women of honor, duty, and sacrifice – who do and say what is right while serving with all our might – in the face of intense pressure (even from our own sinful natures) to cave and take the easy way out.
- It’s being proud of Jesus and His Word and not ashamed of Him or of the Law & Gospel that brings repentance and salvation to all mankind.

It’s the CROSS – or it’s HELL. Each one of God’s children has their very own unique cross, whether they like it or not, He gives us one. When we drop it – He picks it up / He picks us up . . . and He gives it right back. It can be tolerable, it can be uncomfortable, it can be painful, it can be downright brutal, it just is what it is, but it’s always there.

When time runs out – either individually, or for us all . . . those in repentant faith (and therefore under the CROSS) will get the kind, compassionate, humble, gentle, loving, forgiving **Jesus** – who will take us by the hand and welcome us into heaven. And then, the CROSS will have served its purpose and will finally be left behind and be out of our lives forever.

Those without the CROSS and therefore without faith and without repentance – will get the tough, unyielding, strong, and harsh **Jesus** who will say, ***“Away from me you evildoers, I never knew you.”*** And they will be punched out of His presence forever. Jesus said, ***“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”*** This is, quite frankly, more important than ANYTHING else in life. That’s why Jesus said, ***“Whoever wants to save their life (to have their own lives without the cross) will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel (and therefore having a life under the cross) will save it.”***

It’s the CROSS – or it’s HELL. Martin Luther called it “*Das Liebe Kreuz*” – the beloved cross. We need it. It’s good for us. It strengthens us. It opens doors for the Gospel. It keeps us close to our Lord as we follow Him. Therefore (like our Lord) we willingly take up the cross and keep going (like Him) for the JOY that has been set before us . . . the JOY that **He** purchased with **His CROSS**. Amen.