

Taking Up Your Cross

Sermon by Jane Stewart

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Lent 2, Year B (RCL)

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New Song Church

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

The day before Ash Wednesday, I discovered, through Facebook, of all places, a new Lenten devotional that I have since become quite excited about. It is called *Resipiscence: A Lenten Devotional for Dismantling White Supremacy*. Besides increasing my vocabulary by adding the word “resipiscence” to it, it is beginning to change how I read scripture as well as the way I see the world. Its title is appropriate, since, as Webster’s defines it, resipiscence means “change of mind or heart: reformation; often: return to a sane, sound, or correct view or position.” What better title for a Lenten devotional? I was sold by the time I read the Forward and Introduction. Nichola Torbett, who dreamed up this project, and then birthed it with the added expertise, connections, and energy of Vahisha Hasan, begins the forward,

“Are you hearing it too? Are you hearing the call to change, to break rank, to divest allegiance from the status quo and invest in God’s newness? Maybe you hear it as a quiet whisper of dissatisfaction. Maybe it is blaring in your ear like a brass band, making it impossible to concentrate on the old things. In either case, welcome. Let’s listen together. Lent is the perfect time to begin.

. . . This season (of Lent) is about preparing for the resurrection, or our joyful entry into the new life that God has for us.”ⁱ

Lent is about preparing for the resurrection.

That phrase captured me. Intellectually, I know that Lent is the 40 days that lead up to Easter. But in practice, I think I’ve always thought of Lent as leading to the crucifixion, a 40-day journey to

the cross. It is such a stark, demanding, and unsettling season.

During Lent we see a wedge being driven deeper and deeper between Jesus and the religious establishment of his time. The tension builds throughout the season. From the time of Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the wilderness that we read about last week, we hear repeated predictions of his death, beginning with today's shouting match between Peter and Jesus as each tries to set the other straight. During the 6 weeks of Lenten Gospel lessons, the religious authorities grow increasingly threatened by Jesus' popularity with the people, while he further antagonizes them by doing things such as upending tables in the temple, and allowing a woman to anoint him with expensive perfume. In the final week of Lent, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and Jesus' betrayal by Judas seal his fate.

In all of this, the signs that I see and the messages that I hear, lead me to the cross and tomb, not to resurrection. But Torbett is right—resurrection is Lent's end game, not crucifixion. I suppose that I, like Peter, get so caught up in Jesus' description of his suffering, rejection, and crucifixion, that I am unable to also hear his "after three days (I will) rise again" promise of resurrection.

Torbett continues, "One thing we know about resurrection is that it follows a crucifixion. There are aspects of the old life that have to die in order to enter into the new."

But what? What has to die to make space for possibility?

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." These two verses cut to the heart of Lent and of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

The thing that I've wrestled with in preparing this sermon is what Jesus means by "taking up our cross." What are our crosses? What is my cross?

Could taking up our cross mean critically examining the snap

judgments and assumptions we make—those preconceived and deep seated notions about the worth, or lack of worth, of another person that are either overtly taught to us, or that arise out of some sort of need to know where we stand in relationship to those around us?

Most always, such judgments are made without making the effort to learn another person's story or to see through their perspective. As we seek to take up our cross and follow Jesus, let's try to walk in Jesus' sandals, to hear through Jesus' ears, to see through Jesus' eyes.

Because, think about it—who are the people Jesus loved? Who are the people Jesus gathered around himself? Who did Jesus go out and actively seek to understand their lives and their stories and to draw them into the circle of his love? I expect that at least some of them were the very people that I might have made one of those snap judgments about. Can we practice resipiscence and turn our judgments around to a "Jesus" way of being in the world?

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

For some of us, taking up our cross means becoming a revolutionary—championing a cause—standing up to laws and systems that favor White over Black and Brown, peace over justice, or the rights of the individual over the welfare of the community. Revolutionaries speak truth to power without regard for the cost to self. Their cross is the cause of justice.

At a time of year when high school students might otherwise be thinking about prom, or softball season, or submitting applications for summer camps, or jobs, or college, a group of teens-turned-activists from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL are turning their grief into action. They are setting up a massive social media campaign, preregistering voters who will be 18 by the time of the mid-term elections, being interviewed by major news outlets, and planning a "March for Our Lives" march on Washington on March 24 in concert with sister

marches across the nation that day to demand responsible gun legislation. What started as a social media initiative has exploded nationwide into the “Never Again” movement. I doubt that March 24 was chosen for this reason, but it certainly comes to my mind that this march on Washington takes place just the day before Christians will celebrate Palm Sunday, which we might also call Jesus’ march on Jerusalem.

It has been only 12 days since 17 of their classmates, teachers, and coaches were murdered and 14 others injured by a gunman armed with an assault rifle. In that short 12-day span of time, we’ve witnessed these teenagers, many too young to vote, be transformed into champions for sensible gun legislation and into leaders of a high-energy political movement.

If any of them have acted because they are Christians, I haven’t heard that story line, so I won’t presume to say that they are “taking up their cross”. But these teens-turned-activists are certainly setting an amazing example for those of us who seek to follow the cross of Christ—showing us the power and impact that we can make on our community, our state, even on our national landscape, and even against such Goliaths as the NRA.

As we might expect, following the way of the cross is difficult. At the same time, it is also empowering and life-giving. When we take up our cross, find our voice, unite with others, and hold the feet of those in power to the fire as we demand change, we answer Jesus’ call to discipleship.

I know that some of you are doing just that. You’ve turned your passion for health care reform into phone calls and letters to legislators, your passion for the environment into smaller carbon footprints, your passion for racial equity into first steps toward dismantling racism, your dissatisfaction with the current political climate into activism that demands change. There are so many ways in which New Songers seek justice, practice selfless giving, and speak and act on behalf of those whose voices are too often ignored.

Do you think of those things as “your cross”? Should you? After

all, one doesn't have to be a Christian to speak out against injustice or to speak up on behalf of people whose voices are ignored. The question to ask yourself is what motivates you to work for justice? Does your faith play a role in that motivation? I'm guessing that it does.

People often think of their "cross" as some hardship that they have to bear—a debilitating disease or some other raw deal that life has dealt them. What if, instead, we think of our cross as an invitation to die to self and to choose the way of life and resurrection for others? "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Let me leave you with the question that Nichola Torbett asks in her introduction to "Resipiscence." What has to die in me to make space for possibility? The cross is not the end of Jesus' story, nor is it the end of ours. Resurrection is. Lean in to life. Figure out what your cross is, take it up, and follow Jesus. Prepare, not for death, but for resurrection.

Amen.

ⁱ Nichola Torbett, introduction to Resipiscence: A Lenten Devotional for Dismantling White Supremacy. <https://www.transformnetwork.org/bookstore/lentdevotional2018-download>