

February 28, 2021
New Song Episcopal Church
Matthew Helmke
(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

Die to Live

The Lutheran theologian (and conconspirator against Hitler), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote, “When Christ bids a man come, he bids him come and die.” If you have been in the Church long enough you have likely heard that quote. It’s even printed on the back of my copy of his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, which is the book in which he wrote this.

I would like to start by reading that quote in its original context:

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

Jesus presents the message this way:

“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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

This is overpowering, even disturbing at first read.

As humans we like to think the Gospel is about our help, both for today and for tomorrow. What we too often gloss over is the path to receiving that assistance. God’s favor is free. Receiving it is costly. To receive the full benefit of what God offers we must let go.

We have to let go of things like these:

- Our illusion of control
- Our need to know why
- Our belief that we get to live however we want

Today's reading from the Book of Genesis foreshadows this well with its narrative, but I think it is the commentary from the Book of Romans that is most enlightening.

Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Some definitions might help at this point.

To reckon means to consider or regard something in a certain way. Perhaps in the sense of judging, but in this context more like viewing as. "It's gonna rain, I reckon," is not just old fashioned farmer talk. It's a way of saying, "Based on what I observe, I am convinced that..."

Righteousness is being morally correct. It's the state of being good, virtuous.

So, what the author of Romans is saying is that God considered Abraham virtuous, not because Abraham followed rules perfectly (spoiler: he didn't), but because when God told Abraham something, Abraham believed God.

What then might it mean to lose your life to save it?

I think the short answer is that it means we must repeatedly relinquish our desires, our plans, our schemes and designs, and instead prioritize faith and trust above them.

When I was in the sciences, we would design experiments carefully. We would always try to limit variables and try to isolate the object of our research from as many influences as possible. The goal was to try to test whether changing just one thing was impactful or not. If there are too many things happening at the same time, you can't possibly know whether X or Y or Z is responsible for the affect you are studying.

Plans and designs aren't bad things, in fact, they are quite useful. However, in real life our plans cannot take into account all of the facts and possibilities that can influence the success of our arrangements.

We must learn to discern which plans are worth creating and seeking to follow and then give up the illusion of control over what happens next.

This reminds me of a couple classes I took as a university undergraduate student. I had a social sciences minor and pursued learning about various cultures and ways of thinking and living. One class was called "the concept of death in Asian thought" and another was a survey of Eastern religious influences and how those were expressed in the humanities. Both started what has been a life-long journey of learning.

Specifically, this idea of letting go of control reminds me of aspects of Buddhist thought, where humans are noted to try to control things because we do not realize the truth—that we have never actually had control of *any* of these things. Control is an illusion and the sooner we let go of the illusion the sooner we find peace from the stress and energy expenditure of trying to control. Surrender to faith. Discover that all is well even without your input.

Christ calls us to come, but doing so means we must follow the example of believing there is a bigger picture involved than we can see or understand. As we do our part to listen and follow, we must also embrace the mystery of faith that trusts in and hopes for a positive result, regardless of whether we see how that result may be achieved.

Those who want to save their life (by grasping tightly to control and desires) will lose it. Those who lose their life for Christ's sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.

The wealthiest person in the world has no more control over the hour and manner of their death than you or I. No greater piece of mind. No deeper hope.

Only in giving up those illusions do we acquire peace and hope. Only in faith do we find the security and life that we seek.

Amen.

Old Testament

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

The Psalm

Psalm 22:22-30

Deus, Deus meus

- 22 Praise the LORD, you that fear him; *
stand in awe of him, O offspring of Israel;
all you of Jacob's line, give glory.
- 23 For he does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;
neither does he hide his face from them; *
but when they cry to him he hears them.
- 24 My praise is of him in the great assembly; *
I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship him.
- 25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the LORD shall praise him: *
"May your heart live for ever!"
- 26 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, *
and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.

- 27 For kingship belongs to the LORD; *
he rules over the nations.
- 28 To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow down in worship; *
all who go down to the dust fall before him.
- 29 My soul shall live for him;
my descendants shall serve him; *
they shall be known as the LORD'S for ever.
- 30 They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn *
the saving deeds that he has done.

The Epistle

Romans 4:13-25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

The Gospel

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”