

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Tiffani Harris

Denying . . . what? And where are we going again?

Mark 8:31-38, Psalm 22:23-31

February 25, 2024

This past summer, you gave me the gift of a sabbatical, and what a gift it was. Thank you so much, if you haven't heard me say it, thank you so much. It was such a gift for our family. During the sabbatical, Brent and I took a pilgrimage. We've never done this before; we always kind of wanted to try it. It was not a long journey, but it was a path that pilgrims have walked for over 1300 years to the birthplace of Christianity in Britain: Holy Island. Our women's spiritual formation group had planned this pilgrimage for the summer of 2020 canceled that, and we were never able to take it. And I was so glad I had the opportunity to do it.

This pilgrimage is tricky because to get to Holy Island from the mainland town of Lindisfarne, one walks across the seabed when the tide has receded. Pilgrims must time their walk so that they travel when the tide is out and walk back before the tide returns that evening. Every day, the tide times change. 8-foot poles staked in the ground mark the path along with tall rescue towers for distressed pilgrims who have incorrectly calculated the tide and are caught in the rising sea.

Given this, Brent and I hired a local guide to help us navigate it. We did as he told us: tied our shoes together and threw them over our shoulders. While walking barefoot along the damp seabed, we noticed that our guide was taking us a different way than other pilgrims. He motioned to us to follow him and trust him that he knew what he was doing. Our guide pointed out edible sea plants and a group of seals not far away. To the north, we could see other pilgrims following the poles and trudging along. Then we began to hear their loud complaints and expletives. Looking over, we saw they were knee-deep in sludge and muck. The tar-like substance was so thick that their wellies were stuck in it, their legs covered in black muck, and they were hardly moving. Gratefully following our guide, we marveled at this sight, chuckled a little, and kept moving. Once on the island, we stopped for prayer at St. Aidan's cross, noticing the remnants of black muck on the legs and shoes of other pilgrims.

Today in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus bids his disciples to trust him and follow. Saying (v. 34) *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.* It is not an easy follow like ours was on the pilgrimage to Holy Island. If only it were that simple.

In this second week of Lent, most of us have already fallen short of our Lenten commitments. And there is grace for all of us. But it is a reminder that following Christ is not always as easy as that pilgrimage.

This is our Lenten work: We open our hearts and souls to God so that God can recreate in us. The spiritual practices of prayer, reading Scripture, and denying something can be tools that God uses to do this important inner transformation. Just as God gave Abram and Sarai a new name to mark the beginning of a personal commitment between God and them. So, you and I have a new name: disciple. The season of Lent is about growing deeper in our understanding of discipleship.

Today, we encounter the Apostle Peter also trying to understand what it means to be a disciple. He has just rightly and boldly claimed that Jesus is the Christ – The Messiah. Jesus responds that he must undergo suffering, be killed, and rise again. Peter, pulling Jesus aside, said something like:
Wait, Jesus, that's crazy talk, we've got your back.

He was probably recalling *Genesis 49:11* which says the Messiah is supposed to bring down the oppressor with a mighty sword, delivering victory to all those who are under the thumb of the empire.

Christ's rebuke is shocking: *Get behind me, Satan. For your mind is not set on divine things but on a human perspective. You are not seeing with the eyes of faith.*

I can imagine Peter saying, come again, Jesus? *Wait . . .you're going to suffer? . . . I am going to what...?* Peter did not understand, and I can empathize. It is tempting to limit God's way of being to what we desire and can understand.

Over and over in Mark, the disciples struggle to truly see what God is up to. Interestingly this event is bookended by two healing stories. Having just fed the 4,000 people, Jesus heals a blind man. The first touch of Christ's hand healed his sight **partially**. It took a second touch for the man to see fully.

Following in Mark 10, Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus who immediately sees and follows Christ. In between these two stories are the three passion and resurrection predictions. But in contrast to these two healings, Peter and the disciples cannot escape their blindness. What they see as valuable, is actually the culprit to their lack of sight. Their hopes and dreams are blinding them. Their blindness also isn't healed with just one touch.

"If anyone wants to become my followers let them deny themselves." Christ says. What does this really mean? Does this mean we give all of ourselves away until there is nothing left? Are we called to asceticism and extreme austerity? Julian of Norwich held a funeral for herself before she became a spiritual guide and anchoress. Some have taken this to mean that we never put our needs before others. What about boundaries and caring for self, you might ask?

Jesus demonstrated caring for self and setting boundaries, resting during a storm, eating with friends, praying, and getting away for soul care. The word for deny in v.34 means *refuse to follow*. *Denying self means: Refuse to follow self.*

Instead, we follow Christ who loves and cares for us and wants for our well-being. In doing so, we refuse to follow our plans and our desires. We seek God's desires first. *Not my will but yours be done O Lord.*

This means, as disciples we approach life differently. It could look like: Many small acts of sacrifice in the purifying chamber of the home... Daily acts of denial in extending grace and forgiveness... Sharing hospitality with those in need... Relinquishing status and power and security... Giving sacrificially...

When Christ said **"take up your cross"** the original hearers knew exactly what it meant as do those who flee persecution today. For us today, it could mean suffering. . . or faithful endurance. Trusting God in trials, not avoiding. Facing our lament and offering it to God. Not many of us are faced with explicit suffering for our faith.

But there is a suffering that comes from our following Christ: It might be discomfort from living a life with different values, magnified in the halls of the school / office. Career changes and less income following a call from God to family or service. Giving our lives sacrificially with acts of love, compassion, and justice. This is true discipleship.

There is also a suffering that comes as a result of the human condition. Today's Psalm, 22 says, *God does not despise the affliction of the afflicted, nor does God hide his face from me but hears our cry.* We can be assured that God sees the suffering and pain of this world. God looks at and towards our suffering. God **does not** turn his face away. Oh this is good news. When you are stuck in the muck of tribulation and suffering, it is often hard to see God's face, I know. Christ felt that way too. It is this same Psalm of lament that falls off his lips on the cross: *My God why have you forsaken me?* If Christ can so honestly pray this prayer, we can, too.

The Psalms of lament, help us take our lament and pain before God. So that it may be redeemed. God can redeem it – transform it and heal it. This is the mystery, the beauty, and the hope of the resurrection.

You may know the old spiritual, *I Want Jesus to Walk with Me. In my trials, Lord, walk with me. In my troubles Lord, walk with me.* In Mark 8:34, Christ asks us to walk with him: ***Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me.***

Christ came to walk with us, to suffer in the world. . . and to redeem it. He turns and says to his disciples and to you and me: *follow me.* . . meaning *I want you to be with me.*

So, since we are following Christ, we might consider: where does Christ go? We recall all the times Christ walked to the suffering, the sick, the lame, the outcasts, the homeless, the brokenhearted, those caught in traumatic cycles, the hungry, the naked, and those overlooked. *When you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me, he said. (Mt. 25)* In **these** places of absence, Christ is found and understood. Christ is there. Christ is known in the very place where the world doesn't see God.

Deny self, take up your cross, and follow me. Why would Christ say these hard things? Doesn't Jesus also say: *My yoke is easy and my burden is light.* (Mt. 11:30) So, which is it? This is the mystery of discipleship. Following Christ requires reorientation, change, letting go, and refusing to follow self. This is hard work.

With the spiritual discipline of detachment or relinquishment, God helps us to let go. Let go of distractions and desires. Let go of fear, anger, and striving. Let go of following myself. In turn, trust and joy begin to grow. Fertile soil for the peace that passes all understanding. This is where freedom in Christ is found. These are growing conditions for God's slow work of recreation in us. This is how burdens are made light. For he says: *In this world you will have trouble and tribulation but take heart, for I have overcome the world. I tell you this so that you may have peace.* (Jn 16:33)

Christ's call to *deny self, take up our cross, and follow him* is a call *into* the world, rather than *away* from it. It is a call to discipleship that is both interior and exterior. On our pilgrimage to Holy Island, I learned more about St. Aidan, who followed Christ's call into the world *and into* brokenness and suffering. Aidan is known for his gentle approach of sharing the love of Christ, in both deed and action. Sent from Iona as a missionary, he slowly won over the people of Northumbria when his predecessor could not. Caring for orphans, ransoming people out of slavery, and walking the countryside making disciples, he invited all to

his table of fellowship. St. Aidan's prayer is a prayer that many pilgrims have prayed as they walked to Holy Island:

*Leave me alone with God as much as may be.
As the tide draws, the waters close in upon the shore,
Make me an island, set apart,
alone with you, God, holy to you.*

*Then with the turning of the tide
prepare me to carry your presence to the busy world beyond,
the world that rushes in on me
till the waters come again and fold me back to you. Amen.*

Now we prepare our hearts for communion at the table of our Lord.

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