

TEXT: Mark 8:31-38

THEME: Those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save it.

SUBJECT: Life

TITLE: General Jesus

2nd Sunday in Lent

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Messiah Moravian

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“If anyone wishes to come along behind me, let him deny himself utterly and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his soul will lose it; but whoever will lose his soul for the sake of me and of the good tidings will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole cosmos and forfeit his soul? For what might a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Hart’s translation)

Often Jesus’ words seem perversely contrary to common sense. The immediacy of the personal address in today’s gospel reading confronts each and every individual with a call to be ready to lose life in order to find it, a call we must answer with either a yes or a no.

And yet, as often happens, Jesus’ advice is also based on common sense—the sort of down to earth, practical wisdom found in popular advice columns written by Carolyn Hax (Washington Post), Robin Abrahams (Boston Globe), Heather Havrilesky (New York Magazine), or in the Book of Proverbs.

In the seventh century BCE the Greek lyric poet Tyrtaeus wrote, “The man who risks his life in battle has the best chance of saving it; the one who flees to save it is the most likely to lose it.”

Jesus takes this piece of secular, military wisdom and transposes it onto a different plane. The transposition is apt, because Jesus pictures himself as a general in an army, and the present situation as one of fierce battle—the climatic battle, in fact, between God’s army and that of the personified power of evil in the world.

From the outset of his ministry Jesus announces that God is about to invade the world and smash Satan’s strongholds; in fact, one of the commonest nuances of the word usually translated as “gospel,” is “good news from the battlefield.” Jesus calls people to follow him intrepidly into the final battle, without looking back, without hesitating, without giving a thought to the danger that such following might pose to their lives. And he promises that those who do so will, against all expectations, find life.

What sort of battle is going on here? And what sort of general is Jesus? Generals don’t usually end up being crucified—unless they’re bad generals. Yet this Jesus ends his life nailed to a Roman cross, dying through a mode of execution so horrific that it was considered to be appropriate only for slaves.

The irreducible fact about Jesus is that he was executed. Yet he did not represent an armed threat to the existing order. He broke no civil or criminal laws. He violated religious laws and customs

regarding the Sabbath, hand washing, and holiness, but in every case the issue hung on interpretation, and no doubt some rabbis would have supported him; at least they would not have condemned him to death. He mainly taught, healed, and exorcised. Why then was he such a threat that he had to be killed?

Scholars have suggested a variety of reasons, none of them alone adequate to account for his death. None of the charges raised against him by his enemies—that he threatened to destroy the Temple, perverted the nation, forbade the giving of tribute to Caesar, and claimed to be king—are true as stated.

Even the community of his followers was at a loss to explain his death. After the Jewish authorities have lodged all their charges, Mark can still depict Pilate asking, “Why, what evil has he done?” In the Gospel of John, when Peter asked the Jewish authorities for the charges against Jesus, they answer, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over” (John 18:30) in short, “Trust us.” The book of Acts states, “Even though they [the authorities] found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate (13:28) to have him killed.”

The whole event was so puzzling that some in the church ascribed it to “the definite plan of God”; but it was still clear that the actual execution was the work of the authorities, both Jewish and Roman. These authorities were not mere pawns in a divine plan of salvation, but had reasons of their own of sufficient cogency and urgency to act as they did.

“God surely anticipated that a person like Jesus would be killed by an order established on violence, but God did not kill Jesus, or require his death, or manipulate others into sacrificing him” says Walter Wink, the late biblical scholar, theologian and activist. “God may have found a way of triumphing over this crime, but God did not cause it. Jesus was killed by the definite plan and malice aforethought of the Powers, as the New Testament writers clearly state.”

In the war against “the Powers” (evil), the Powers are powerless in the face of anyone willing to lose life in order to find it. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes how he learned to do this amid the starvation and brutality of a Soviet prison camp:

From the moment you go to prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself, “My life is over, a little early, to be sure, but there’s nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die—now or later . . .” Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogator will tremble. Only the man who has renounced everything can win the victory.

The hymn writer James Russell Lowell clarifies the challenge:

*Once to every soul and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
Between that darkness and that light.*

***Then** to side with truth is noble,
When we share her wretched crust,
Before her cause bring fame and profit,
And it is prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave soul chooses
While the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude makes virtue
Of the faith they had denied.*

*By the light of burning martyrs,
Christ, Thy bleeding feet we track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever
With the cross that turns not back;
New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth,
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of truth.*

*Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet it is truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne by wrong:
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Stands God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.*

PRAYER: "The voice we can scarcely hear" Walter Brueggemann

You are the voice we can scarcely hear
because you speak to us about dying and suffering,
and we are impacted by so many voices
that have to do with power
and competence
and success.

We do know that you are the voice that gives life,
that you are the voice that opens futures to people who are hopeless.

We are part of a hopeless people,
because the other voices eat at our hearts,
and we are immobilized
and we become deaf.

So we pray for new ears.

We pray that your voice may be more audible to us,
that we may be able to sort out the death-giving
from the life-giving voices among us.

We pray in the name of Jesus,
through whom you have spoken
in such inscrutable ways.