

**The Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2021**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

**Christ's Cross and Ours**

Mark 8:27–38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*


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While on the way with His disciples, Jesus first asked, **“Who do you say that I am?”** (v 29), then He began to teach them, saying, **“the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again”** (v 31), and finally He said, **“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me”** (v 34). This is our text.

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Today, as we continue our journey through Lent with Jesus and the disciples, the cross looms large. The cross looms large for Jesus as the Christ, and the cross looms large for the Christian who follows Him.

## 3.

The twelve disciples had been with Jesus for at least a year, maybe longer. During that time, they'd seen a lot. They'd seen unclean spirits cast out, Jairus's daughter raised from death, thousands fed with a few loaves and fish. And the disciples had heard a lot. They're heard teaching about the Sabbath, parables of the kingdom, instruction about what truly defiles a person. They'd been around the block with Jesus once or twice. Which means they're ready for what Jesus does next. It's like Jesus now gives them a one-question mid-term exam He gives them. “Stand up and give answer to the question I now ask you,” Jesus says: **“Who do you say that I am?”** (v 29).

The disciples had already been asked about what other people say, about the various opinions and confessions floating around. It's clear that people hold Jesus in high regard—right up there with John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets. Popular opinion respects Him as a great teacher, as an exceptional man, as someone deeply spiritual. Sounds like today! But it's not enough to repeat what others say. Jesus wants to know what *all of you* confess: **“Who do you say I am?”** (v 29).

It's not just a question of how you *feel* about Jesus or what you *think* about Jesus. Your feelings and your reason aren't the best guides. You can't rely on them. For spiritual things, the Holy Spirit is needed. The right answer, the truth about Jesus—that comes

by revelation. It's given by God Himself. God reveals it. He reveals it to the disciples through Jesus' earthly ministry. He reveals it to us through Holy Scripture which everywhere speak of Jesus. So, really, who is Jesus—for *you* and for *all*?

You may remember what comes next. Peter raises his hand first. He's the eager student. He answers for all twelve, for the whole Church, for every Christian then and now: Jesus, you're greater than John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. **"You're the Christ"** (v 29), the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Promised Savior. Is this what you also believe? Yes, I believe that Jesus is the Christ. There's your A+ answer on the mid-term. There are the disciples at their best. They speak what is true and right. They know *who* Jesus is.

## 2.

But that's not the only thing they need to know. What does it mean for Jesus to be the Christ? Peter and the other eleven aced their mid-term, but class isn't over yet. There's some new material to master. They've got to learn what the Christ is going to do. They need to know what's going to happen to Him. Their answer that Jesus is the Christ is accurate but incomplete.

So Jesus **"began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He said this plainly"** (v 31–32). To me, it's like they've come to the top of a lookout and way, way in the distance the cross is visible for the first time. Now that they confess Him to be the Christ, Jesus lets them see where the Christ is headed. The lines of the cross are still a little blurry, like a smudge on a hilltop, but it's there. The outline can be seen. Good Friday is coming. So Jesus adds to the "Christ" title these elements: suffering, death, and resurrection. And He does it confidently, boldly, and openly. He says, "This is what *must* happen."

You might remember that Peter speaks up again at this point. Peter, for one, won't have it. He won't hear of it. He wants nothing to do with suffering, rejection, and death. "That's not the way of my Christ!" Suddenly, he's no longer the student, the disciple. Now he's the teacher He puts himself above Jesus. He puts his word and his thoughts above the word of the Lord. He'll tell God how it should be. **"And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him"** (v 32). "Now You listen to me, Jesus . . ." He begins to lecture the Christ.

But Jesus won't be lectured. He doesn't answer to Peter. He doesn't answer to any of the disciples. He doesn't even answer to the Church. He came to do the Father's will. That means death and resurrection. Anything less is a different Christ, a false Christ. So Jesus

rebukes Peter strongly, **“Get behind Me, Satan! You aren’t setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man”** (v 33). “If you want to know what it means for Me to be the Christ,” Jesus says, “then you must know My cross. There’s no other way.” What does it mean to “get behind” Jesus? Two things come to mind: First, it means to get out of His way. Clear out and let Him go to the cross. Second, it means to follow Him. It means to go where He leads.

It’s just like St. Paul said, **“We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews—like Peter—and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are being called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”** (1 Cor 1:23–24). To our reason and our senses, the cross is completely foolish. If the cross doesn’t seem completely foolish to you, it’s because your eyes have been trained by the Holy Spirit to see it and know it for what it is. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are higher than our ways. Where the world sees only a man dying an excruciating death, God Himself is there giving His flesh for the life of the world. He saves through the cross.

This is what the Holy Spirit teaches us about the death of Jesus, and so wonderfully and beautifully in Romans chapter 5: **“While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly”** (Rom 5:6). And **“God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Rom 5:8). And **“if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life”** (Rom 5:10). His cross is *for us* sinners and for our salvation. His cross shows God’s love. His cross reconciles us to God.

### 1.

This is what the cross means for us! How different than what Peter expected. When Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, he must have thought he had it made. “Why, I’m following the Christ!” he could boast. For him, that meant winning, not losing. For him that meant life, not death. For him that meant gaining the whole world and losing nothing. Then Jesus threw a great big bucket of cold water on all that: **“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.”** If you want to know what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, then you’re going to have to know about *His* cross. And if you want to know what it means to be a Christian, then you need to know about *yours*. **“For whoever would save his life will lose it,”** Jesus says, **“but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words—of My cross—in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in the glory of the Father with the holy angels”** (vv 34–38).

Peter didn't want any cross. But Jesus says that the cross-less Christ is no Christ at all and cannot save. Peter didn't want any cross. But Jesus says that the cross-less Christian is no Christian at all.

What does it mean for a Christian to take up his cross and follow Jesus? For one thing, we know that the crosses we bear don't save us. Jesus isn't saying, "I'll take up My cross, and you take up yours to save yourself." Not at all! Only the cross of Jesus saves. But the crosses we bear do have one very important benefit for us as Christians: they point us to Jesus and they bring us back to Jesus over and over again.

There are three ways we can think of Christians bearing a cross:

- We think first of our sufferings—the suffering we have in this fallen world but especially any suffering we endure for the sake of Christ. The one who follows Jesus will not escape suffering, yet our suffering points us back to Jesus. Consider sufferings you have gone through in your own life, either for being a Christian or simply because the world is fallen. What do our sufferings do? They bring us to our knees and lead us to look for refuge in Him.
- The second cross we can think of is the cross of our sins. Yes, our sins were crucified with Christ, but sin doesn't go away easily. It doesn't die without a fight. So the cross is the daily putting to death of our sinful nature. The one who follows Jesus will struggle with sin, yet this struggle points us back to Jesus. Who will deliver me from this body of death? But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. You may wonder why your Lord allows you to continue to struggle with sin. Why does He allow it to remain? So that we would continue to find refuge in Him.
- Thirdly, we think of the cross of our vocations. We take up the cross by shouldering the needs and burdens of our neighbors, from the infants in our homes to the elderly family and friends for whom we help care. The one who follows Jesus is called to lay down his life for others, yet this call also points us back to Jesus. As we go through daily life, as we are called to shoulder the burden of others, we find how insufficient and weak we are, and we are led back to Christ.

A Christian must be willing to suffer. A Christian must be willing to do battle with sin. A Christian must be willing to serve others. To have life with Christ, we must be ready to give up this life. None of this is easy. We don't do any of it particularly well. We don't

suffer well. We don't battle sin well. We don't serve others well. Already to confess this is not to hold on to ourselves but to die to ourselves. To confess that we are insufficient for suffering and for sin and for our vocations is to deny ourselves and to look to Christ. When these crosses crush us and would kill us, that's when we are saved—not by what we do, but by Jesus. He picks up the cross. He carries it. The one difference between His cross and yours is that His cross is made up of the wood of all crosses, the crosses of every single one of us. But He most certainly carries our crosses. He shoulders the burdens of all. He dies not just for a good man or a righteous person but for every single sinner.

BY BEARING HIS CROSS AS CHRIST,  
JESUS ENABLES US TO TAKE UP OUR CROSSES AND FOLLOW HIM.

We carry our crosses not independent of Christ but dependent on Him. Each fresh trial we have, each new suffering, each new struggle with sin, each calling that beckons us to serve—each one is an invitation into what we heard today. It's an invitation from Jesus: "Get behind Me and follow more closely along the way." To step where He steps, to go where he goes, to have our eyes focused on Him. We are called to carry our crosses. It's not always easy. We don't always do it well, but we always have Christ, carrying not only His cross but ours.

This is our prayer today, our prayer of thanksgiving. We thank our Father in heaven first and last for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for crosses to bear. May our Lord Jesus Christ who bore His cross all the way to death help us carry our crosses through this life into the life of the endless world to come.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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