

<sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them 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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>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.”

<sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>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.”

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The disciples have ample reason to view things with rose-colored glasses. Everything seems to be going well with Jesus and his ministry. Where today’s gospel lesson picks up, it is right after Jesus has told the disciples that he is indeed the Messiah, that long-awaited king who will liberate the people of Israel from the conquering oppressors. Of course they take his declaration of messiahship to mean earthly authority. We know that not only because that was everyone’s expectation, but also because soon these disciples will argue over which of them is the greatest and they will make requests to be seated next to Jesus once he claims his throne. But there are outside factors that contribute to their optimistic perspective. There has been significant local fanfare around the work Jesus has been doing, and when he has

been confronted by local leaders, he continually beats them in debate. The disciples are right: things are looking good for Jesus and those who are with him.

Jesus is aware of how his disciples are viewing things, and he decides it is time to set things straight. Today's lesson begins, "[Jesus] began to teach them 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." The disciples probably didn't know how to process this new information they were hearing; by all accounts, things were looking good for this ministry! To best understand what is going on with this passage, we need to look at the word "must" found in this sentence: the Son of Man "must" undergo great suffering and so on. Often we conclude that means God set events in place so that Jesus' death "must" atone for our sins. This particular "atonement theory" is discussed a couple of times in the New Testament, but the whole of the New Testament never settles on only one way to understand Christ's death. Plus this atonement theory is not hinted at anywhere in Mark's gospel. So how should we hear and understand Jesus saying in our gospel lesson today that he "must" undergo these sufferings? The explanation is rather simple yet still profound when we look at the context of the whole of Mark's gospel: Jesus "must" suffer and die because powerful humans will be threatened by his healing mission; they will violently reject the disruption to their power that his mission poses. They didn't know it, but those powerful people were opposing the in-breaking reign of God in this world. His mission is to faithfully carry out God's healing work in this world at any cost to himself.

Jesus fully understands the risks he takes by opposing the power of empire and the forces of evil and violence. Doing such is a lonely road that is not easily understood. Although it is a lonely path that bears risks, Jesus still invites us to find our lives in it. He invites his followers to find their lives by being willing to forego themselves in order to prioritize God's mission of bringing healing and life to this world. It took time for Peter and other disciples to understand this. Peter confronts Jesus about this in today's lesson, and

later he and other disciples will abandon Jesus as his mission comes to a head. They just didn't understand the value of this ministry's mission. But Peter's discipleship doesn't end when the cock crowed. Years later Peter's story ends with him being crucified by the empire. It took time and witnessing the Easter resurrection to change Peter, but he came around to understanding what it means to make God's mission his life's priority.

As our reading today ends, Jesus turns to the crowd, knowing many are prospective disciples, and he instructs them on the cost of discipleship. When we prioritize God's mission in our lives, it comes at a cost because there are powers all around us and within us that resist the full healing, inclusion, and valuing of all life that God's reign brings. You and I are fortunate to live in a country where we can live out our faith without fear of being executed for it. Some Christians in America will cry out about their persecution, but an honest look at the matter is that at worst Christians in America might face an occasional inconvenience because of our faith. That truth doesn't change or limit the point that Jesus makes today: his followers should prioritize God's healing mission in their lives. When they do that, there will be uncomfortable pushback by the powers that prefer empire, evil, and violence. And, although death never is our goal, prioritizing God's healing mission will lead to death for some people.

*Deitrich Bonhoeffer. Martin Luther King Jr. Archbishop Oscar Romero. Charleston's own Emmanuel Nine: Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel L. Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson.*

Those are just some from the past century. There is also Fabián Kreischer, a Lutheran pastor in Argentina who was brutally murdered in his home earlier this month because of his outspoken support for the LGBTQI community in his country and for people living with HIV.

God's reign of healing ministry brings life, but it is a threat to many powers that be. Prioritizing that mission in our lives rarely results in anything worse than our inconvenience, but at times in some places the powers decide that death "must" be the answer. Discipleship, according to Mark's gospel, means getting on board with Jesus' ministry. His ministry would not allow anything to disrupt the immediate healing and restoration of those who were considered outcasts or broken. When we fully contemplate that, Jesus will lead us into difficult and uncomfortable places. It may require that we have a change of heart, a change of opinion, and perhaps a change of theology. When Jesus leads us into that discomfort, we can be assured that Jesus will lead us through it. Today's gospel asks us -- as individuals, as a congregation -- to contemplate what it means to participate in God's healing ministry for this world... and then act.

Amen.