

YEARNINGS

Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life

Facing Our Realities

(Yearning for the Way)

A prompting offered by the Ruth Hopkins, Seminary Intern
March 7-8, 2009 ♦ Second Sunday in Lent
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Psalm 22:23-31

You, who fear God, praise God! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify God; stand in awe of God, all you offspring of Israel! For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; God did not hide God's face from me, but heard when I cried to God.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear God. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek God shall praise God. May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to God; and all the families of the nations shall worship before God. For dominion belongs to God and God rules over the nations.

To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before God shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for God. Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about God, and proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that God has done it.

Mark 8:31-38

Then [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. 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."

While I was cleaning out a closet the other day I came across an old journal of mine. It was hard to believe I was the same person as the girl who was writing in the turmoil of her teen years. The entries are full of the yearnings and desires of a young woman, waiting for "life" to begin. I wanted freedom, I wanted excitement, and I yearned for a glamorous life, a cool apartment, and hip friends. And while many of my girlish dreams and desires were passing fancies, I still yearn for things. I still yearn for meaningful work, health and happiness for myself and those I love.

Rabbi Kula, the author of [Yearnings: embracing the sacred messiness of life](#), says that yearning is *the* defining human experience. Whether we seek answers to the big questions of life, or whether we just want a more meaningful way of living, we yearn for wisdom and some kind of

truth that we can hold on to. We yearn for some certainty in this uncertain world. And, as Rabbi is fond of pointing out, any certainty we claim to have is an illusion. Life is unpredictable. In fact, if there is something we can count on, it is that we can't count on things. But we yearn for some way through the uncertainty anyway, don't we? Especially when things get a bit topsy-turvy. We get some unexpected bad news, a loved one dies. Life seems uncertain. We don't know how to make our way.

Then there is that feeling of sameness, day after day, the same things, the same job, the same friends, the same bills, the same problems. We want a break from that sameness, that "same old, same old." We want change, but we can't always name how we *want* it to change. We don't know how to make our way.

So we shift between our expectations and our yearnings, wanting something to hang on to in the bad times, and lamenting our sameness in the, shall we say, less eventful times of life. We live lives of yearning. Where is God anyway? The psalmist says, "You who fear God, praise God." Well, the fear is often there, but the praise, well, it is hard to praise God when the plant closes and loved ones die. And it is hard to praise God when everyday goes by, pretty much the same, and you can't find any meaning in it.

We seem to be looking for the way. The easy way, the better way, the successful way, the way home, we are yearning for some way. And acknowledging that search also means that there is some expectation of the outcome. And life being what it is, what we are expecting is not what we get.

Many of us chose the way of money market funds, and IRAs, to find our accounts diminished, and our very homes threatened. Some of us chose the way of good, clean, living, only to watch our bodies' age, and fall ill anyway. Is this what it is all about? Is this all there is? We yearn for wholeness and healing. We yearn for our dead to be alive. Is this really the way it is?

I can imagine Peter have these same thoughts in today's gospel story. In the passages just before our reading begins, Peter has proclaimed Jesus the messiah. Peter is being completely faithful to his tradition. The word messiah is translated as "anointed one", and in the days of Jesus, it usually meant an anointed king for Israel, and an overthrow of Roman rule. The word brought to mind, triumph, victory, and better days coming.

So can you imagine how deflated they must have felt when Jesus begins to teach them that he "must undergo great suffering, be killed, and after three days rise again"? The messiah is not "supposed to die and suffer", that is not the way it is supposed to go. The way of the Messiah is different, it is supposed to be toward victory, not death.

Peter even confronts Jesus, "Don't say that, you're not going to die, that's not the way the story goes." Jesus sternly corrects Peter and more disturbing words follow. "If you want to become my followers, deny yourselves and take up your crosses and follow me." Crosses? This is the messiah? Can we go back to healing people now?

As for us, we know the end of the story; Peter and the disciples do not. They can't even imagine what is in store. They are, however, quite familiar with the cross, they know it is the Roman's empire's most humiliating, torturing method of capital punishment. To die on a cross is to die a shameful humiliating death, a death for criminals. This is good news? This is the messiah? This is a king? What is going on?

It is easy to pick on Peter. We know the story. But we, like Peter, yearn for our expectations to be met, for our yearnings to make sense. For Peter, it was a yearning for certainty in the tradition he knew, the promise of a messiah. For Peter it was a yearning for change, the end of Roman occupation. These are noble yearnings! Peter does not desire massive wealth, just a promise fulfilled. Fulfilled the way he thought it would be fulfilled.

Like Peter, our yearnings are often motivated by the world around us. We yearn for success, for pleasure, for health, we even yearn for things that we are not sure even exist. When we ask for a way, we are not ready for talk of crosses, and self-denial. Success for us is often determined by images of rising up the ladder of success, not up the hard wood of the cross. Pain is something to avoid, suffering must always be relieved, death must always be denied.

Jesus tells us if we are to be his disciples we are to carry our crosses. The great priest and poet, Malcolm Boyd, muses in his classic book, *Are You Running With Me Jesus?* that maybe carrying our crosses simply means facing our realities. Accepting ourselves, messy people that we are. Accepting our desires, our yearnings, and our quirks! Loving ourselves so we can love others. Facing our realities also means acknowledging the world's weaknesses, naming injustice, shining a flashlight into the dark places. It also means accepting that illness, death, joy, sadness will come, and go. Jesus might be asking us, are you brave enough; can you love enough to love the uncertainty, the weakness, the vulnerability in you, and others? Can you face it, name it, claim it, love it into new life?

If we see our yearnings as crosses, as a part of our reality, Jesus' words become a bit clearer. Face your yearnings, name them, claim them – and gain new life. By naming our pain, by recognizing our yearnings, they become lighter, but left to fester in denial, they can create havoc in our lives. By naming our yearnings we can learn of our vulnerability, our failings, but also our hopes and dreams.

The psalms are wonderful examples of naming yearnings, joy, and pain. The beginning of the Psalm we read today, which is not in our readings this week, begins with “My God, why have you forsaken me?” And yet somehow, as the psalmist recounts all that God has done for him and his ancestors in the past, as the wonderful realization washes over that God was there all along, in all the desire and pain and mess – the psalmist can affirm “you who fear God, praise God” God will be what God will be.

The way through life, the way of a disciple of Jesus, is filled with uncertainty. There will be yearnings so deep that we may feel paralyzed. Certainly, there will be crosses, certainly death will come. There will also be Easter joy, for we do know the end of the story. Of one thing we can be certain, God will be with us. Let us also be with each other, helping each other name our yearnings, and nurture them to new life in Christ. Together, we may find our yearnings sacred, our crosses light, and the way easier for all.

In this season of Lent, I urge you to place your yearnings in the bird's nest. Our yearnings, even those we may be ashamed of, have the power and potential to bring us closer to our God, the God that the psalmist assures us, was with our ancestors in faith and remains with us now, and will be with those that follow long after we are gone. Our yearnings, our realities, are our Lenten crosses. Pick them up, face them, name them – and gain life.