

# Scripture Readings and Sermon

*February 28, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin*

## **Commentary on Esther 2-8** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the first of the exiles began to return to Jerusalem around 536 B.C. More would return with Ezra in 457 and Nehemiah in 444. Esther occurs in Babylon between the first and second wave of returning exiles around 478-473 after Persia conquered Babylon. The majority of books in the Old Testaments focus on the time before the Exile. Esther is one of two, the other being Daniel, that give a glimpse of the period in Exile. Ezra and Nehemiah provide the only Old Testament accounts of the return to Jerusalem. Due to its unique place in the cannon, Esther speaks to the Jewish community that lives outside of Israel. Synagogues read the book of Esther during the Festival of Lots (Purim) in the early spring to remember how God saved the Jewish people from annihilation. The story becomes especially poignant in light of the Holocaust. The question is not if God will save but if you will take part in God's saving plan.

Esther 4:14 "keep silence at such a time as this"

Would you be tempted to keep silent?

Are you willing to speak up for those who have no voice?

Does social media help people stand for what they believe or put on more pressure to keep silent?

Is it easier to follow those who make noise or keep silent instead of asking God what is right?

Do you have a Mordecai who challenges you to do the right thing?

## **Commentary on Mark 8:31-38** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

Jesus once again heads to the northern most point of Israel to Ceasarea Philippi near the border with Tyre and on a major trade route between Tyre and Damascus. In this remote location, Jesus asks the disciples who he is and Peter makes his profession. From Peter's mouth comes a blessing but then Peter rebukes Jesus' talk of death and out comes curses. Peter's proclamation came from God's wisdom but Peter's rebuke came from his human fear of death. Jesus responds by putting death in context, what do you gain by following human wisdom if you loss your soul for an eternity? The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and not the fear of death. The fear of God in this context is the realization that only God can lead us on the path that leads to life even if it is through the cross.

Mark 8:35 "those who want to save their life will lose it"

What does it mean to you to "lose your life"?

Does is simply mean death?

Could the lose of life mean the lose of a lifestyle or beloved tradition?

Could lose of life mean giving up safety and community?

If Jesus asked you to give up your citizenship, could you?

## **Commentary on Romans 4:13-16** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

In Chapter 3, Paul argues that if righteous comes from the Law then all are condemned for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:24). If righteous does not come by works or the law, then what - "the law of faith" (3:27). Righteousness is found "through faith in Jesus Christ" (3:22). This is not new, Paul argues, because Abraham was not made righteous because of his obedience to the Law since there was no Law yet but was made righteous by his faith in God. It was not the law that made Abraham obedient to God's call but his faith. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (4:3) Paul argues that if legal obedience is all that is required, than faith is null

and the promises made to Abraham base on faith are void. Another way to frame Paul's argument is simply, what or who do you have faith in? If a person has faith in the law and rituals, than it is only by human power of adherence that one can be saved. If a person has faith in God, than it is only by the power of God's grace that one can be save. Since the record of human history recorded in the Bible reveals the failure of human power and the persistence of God's grace, the object of faith should be self apparent.

Romans 4:16 For this reason it depends on faith

Is it easier to hide behind the law than it is to stand by faith?

Can we take up our cross without faith?

How deep is your faith? When has its foundations been tested?

Has God ever failed to deliver?

What do you need from God today in order to take up the cross God has shown you?

Sermon **"Take up your cross"** (*Sermon Video*)

Lent begins with the story of the temptation of Jesus and Jesus telling his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. From a human perspective, the cross means death. Peter definitely felt this way when he rebuked Jesus. This view, however, lacks faith. If God has called us to our death, even in our death God will be with us and make sure that everything works out for good. Can death be good? Yes. There are many today who are in nursing homes and home bound who have led a full life and are ready to go home to God. Quantity does not always mean quality. We never no what tribulations and pain awaited a person who we say, "Died young". This is not to say that some die because of human sin apart from God's will. Free will often has collateral damage. Even then, by faith we know that God will bless those who have faith even in the midst of suffering. Jesus acknowledged the suffering he would have to endure but he also saw beyond the basic human fear of death.

The gospels reveal that the cross for Jesus was the way to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven. In the beginning, the Father called Jesus to proclaim the good news but, when the time was right, the Father called Jesus to go to Jerusalem know full well the human reaction to Jesus' message. Even so, Jesus was obedient to showing God's love even to the point of death on a cross (Philippians 2). This is what he calls all his disciples to do by placing their mind on divine things. To take up our cross is to hear God's call for us today and then obediently follow that call wherever God is leading.

This lent, all of the sermons will include a hero of the faith who heard the call of God and followed despite the consequences. On this Sunday, the hero comes from the Book of Esther traditionally read in Jewish synagogues on Purim. During the time of the Babylonian captivity when Persia ruled the land, an enemy of the Jewish people worked to convince the king to annihilate all the Jews in Persian territory. God, however, had place a Jewish woman named Esther as queen. The title of queen, however, did not guarantee her safety or even the ear of the king. When Esther was encouraged by a relative to speak for the Jewish people, she knew that she might die if she accepted the call. This was Esther's cross at "such a time as this". Because she accepted that cross, not only did she live but the Jewish people in Persia lived as well.

Paul reminds us that it is only by faith that we can carry the cross God gives us. We are offered all kinds of crosses. A wise man said, "If you don't know who you are, the world will tell you." The world offers us a variety of crosses. Some of these are wrapped in gold and look like the "good life" only to burden us with debt and anxiety. To choose to accept the cross God offers is to choose God's will as being better for us than the world's will or even our own will. This is an act of faith but through that faith then grace abounds. God will always give us grace sufficient for the cross he asks us to bear. For such a time as this we are called by God to take up our cross by faith and follow Jesus. The question this lent is will you?