**Year A, Proper 17, August 30, 2020**

**Jeremiah 15:15-21 Romans 12:9-21 Matthew 16:21-28**

**Psalm 26:1-8**

**The Cruciform Life**

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I didn’t grow up reading comic books. No one ever introduced me to them. There wasn’t much money for books, much less magazines in my single-parent household; and, besides, comics were the realm of bad guys and super heroes and that didn’t hold my interest when I was a kid.

Recently, though, I’ve discovered graphic novels. Fr. Casey turned me on to *March*, a three-volume series by John Lewis about the Civil Rights Movement. My oldest son, Trevor, noticed them on my bedside table and brought me Art Spiegelman’s two volume *Maus* series about a Jewish survivor of Hitler’s Europe. It’s impressive to me that such serious subjects can come to life through a genre I previously associated with the inner fantasy life of little boys.

I learned this week that The Rev. Dr. Christopher Smith is working on a series of word-for-word graphic novels for the books of the Bible. I was reflecting on our passage today and began sketching out how I’d illustrate this scene from Matthew’s Gospel. That led me to look to see if anyone had done so – he’s working on Matthew now and has shared several fascinating images through his blog.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Today’s passage from Matthew isn’t depicted on Rev. Smith’s blog. In ***my*** version of it, though, the first frame shows Jesus and his disciples walking toward us, with Caesarea Philippi and Mount Hermon looming behind them. They’re walking away from a collection of speech balloons that are now disconnected from their speakers and floating in the not-too-distant background.

“Who do you say that I am?”

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

“Blessed are you … you are Peter … on this rock … build my church … keys of the kingdom.”

In the next frame, we’d see the group from behind. A tiny hint of Jerusalem – 150 miles away – would appear in front of them. At the outskirts of the city, there’s a row of tiny crosses. Golgotha. In this frame, there are no speech balloons; only thought bubbles.

“I knew it!”

“He is the Messiah!”

“There’s Jerusalem. Let’s get him there quickly so he can roust the Romans and take the throne!”

Frame three has Peter at the edge of the group. What’s he thinking?

“Nailed it!”

Probably not a colloquialism I’d leave in my final draft. In any event, there are thought bubbles swirling over Peter’s head:

“The keys to the kingdom?”

“Build his church on me?”

“Guess I’m second in command now. What’s our battle plan? How many others will I need to gather? Such a responsibility – I can’t let him down.”

Finally, we see Jesus in his own frame. He’s walking slightly behind the group, shaking his head at their thoughts and responding with his own:

“They don’t understand. I’m not the Messiah they expect. How can I show them?”

This is the point at which we enter the story today.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Peter cannot fathom what Jesus is saying. Perhaps Jesus’ prediction of his impending death leaves Peter so afraid and grief-stricken that he cannot hear the concluding phrase “and on the third day be raised.” Perhaps the notion of resurrection is so far beyond comprehension that he merely glosses past it. One commentator I read this week observed Peter as seeking to use the keys to the kingdom he’s just receive to bind Jesus to Peter’s own understanding of the role of his Messiah.[[2]](#footnote-2) Let’s not mock Peter. He cannot bear to think of Christ crucified and, if we’re honest, neither can we. As Paul writes, the very idea is “a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). Here, Peter the rock tumbles head-long over the stumbling block and gives in to the temptation to impose his will on God’s.

I know that temptation. I bet you do as well. Jesus knows it, too. I hear it in his Gethsemane prayer: “Let this cup pass from me” (Mt 26:39). I hear it in his abrupt response to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan!”

The difference is that Jesus doesn’t yield to temptation. As quickly as it rears its ugly head for him, he recovers, and the teacher is back. “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” I hear echoes of Isaiah saying, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (55:8). Jesus knows he will transform the world, but he will not do so through conquest, violence, or by exploiting his divinity to accomplish God’s will through force. Rather, Jesus will change the world by emptying himself, humbling himself, and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8). The suffering he will face cannot be avoided.

Jesus’ path involves humility and self-sacrifice, and he invites us to this path as well.

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 will find it.

In the introduction to his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone observes that “The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians hang around their necks. Rather than reminding us of the ‘cost of discipleship’,”, Cone writes, the cross “has become … an easy way to salvation that doesn’t force us to confront the power of Christ’s message and mission.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This was not the case for the twelve men who walked away from Caesarea Philippi that day toward the line of crosses on the horizon. Each of them did, in fact, follow him to their own deaths. Over the years, countless Christians have died for the sake of the Gospel, and this is not merely a phenomenon of ages gone by. Christians today in Egypt, India, the Middle East, and around the world are giving up their lives because of their faith. Two hundred sixty million Christians live in countries listed on the 2020 World Watch List, which monitors areas where Christians face high, very high, or extreme levels of persecution.[[4]](#footnote-4) For many today, Jesus’ call to take up a cross and follow him still carries a literal meaning.

This is not likely to be true for us, yet we are not exempt from the cost of discipleship. We who are invited to follow Jesus are first invited to die to sin and, through the water of baptism, to be buried with Christ in his death. Before we can accept Christ’s invitation to new life, we must first heed his call to die: we die to our plans, goals, and pride in order to set our minds – at all times and in all circumstances – on God’s will. In other words, whether or not we are called to suffer bodily death for the sake of the gospel, we are called to die to self to such an extent that our lives become cruciform – shaped by the cross.

Return with me for a moment to a graphic novel. Only this time, let’s move away from Mount Hermon and Caesarea Philippi and jump forward several thousand pages to the week of Sunday, August 30, 2020.

In this first frame, Jacob Blake – the unarmed Black man who was shot in the back by a police officer last week – sits in a hospital bed, surrounded by his children, learning he will not likely walk again. In the next, Hurricane Laura is battering the Gulf Coast. In a third and fourth, two political parties vie virtually for power and control, with the November election looming large in both backgrounds. In still another, children and parents sit in front of screens at home attempting to learn and work side by side. All of these frames are superimposed over a graph showing Covid19 spikes, patients on ventilators, and unsung medical heroes attending to them.

Turn the page with me, and we find Jesus, surrounded by all these scenes from this week, with a single speech balloon above him, beckoning:

If any want to become my followers,

let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

 You’re in, right? I am. But I’d like a little more guidance. What does that look like? Turn the page one last time. Paul sits at an easel, painting a word picture for us of what a life lived in response to Jesus’ call looks like. The words are painted in the shape of a cross, as if to illustrate what Jesus asks of us.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves … No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let anyone with ears listen.

1. <https://goodquestionblog.com/2020/03/06/the-gospel-of-matthew-as-a-graphic-novel/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jin S. Kim, founding pastor of Church of All Nations, Minneapolis, MN. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY), 2011, at xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ewelina U. Ochab, “Persecuted Christians Are Not Given Much Hope In 2020” published by Forbes on February 18, 2020 (accessed online at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2020/02/18/persecuted-christians-are-not-given-much-hope-in-2020/#6c67c17e6889> on August 17, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)