

Christ Church Valdosta, GA  
Lent 2B, February 28, 2021  
The Rev. Dr. James C. Pace

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As I've told you before, I grew up in the Episcopal Church. I grew up around, through, and within its liturgies of birth, death, and everything in between and they have changed my life over time. I can remember even as a small boy, that I loved the season of Lent. I loved the burning of the palm crosses, the purple vestments, and the purple altar frontals. They were ..... elegant, royal. My mother was the Altar Guild Director at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Palmetto, Florida. My dad was the treasurer, lay reader, usher, and chalice bearer. And a day or so before Ash Wednesday, dad would bring out this really tall step ladder and carefully traipse it into the sanctuary, and together, the three of us would drape the huge crucifix that hung on the wall over the high altar with a really thin, purple veil. Actually, it was a net. It was a sheer veil that covered the corpus of Christ. When it was finally positioned, it cast an eeriness over us all. At least it did to me. The body of Christ on the cross looked shrouded and left us expectant. And though I lapse into such fond recollections all too frequently now, it is good to remember how the church and its liturgies shape our lives.

One of my seminary professors was Dr. Marion Hatchett. He was a kind man gifted in liturgical studies who told us that liturgy was the way that we bring our Sacred Myth to life. Sacred Myth, not meaning something that is untrue, or a fairy tale, but rather, the truths of eternal life that are expressed in and through time. In and through liturgy we come to know these truths in our holy days, the seasons, the colors and their changes, and through the challenges and chances of this mortal life. We live into the pulse of life, we mark the boundaries of our lives and we are given the tools and the courage to break through those boundaries to live truly, authentic lives. That is truly the Good News and the power of faith.

Today, the Second Sunday in Lent, we are told in the Gospel to take up our cross and to lose our lives; in so doing, we will inherit the life eternal. What all does that mean? Probably, for most of us, taking up our cross most often means placing a sterling silver or a gold cross around our neck. All too often after we do this, we simply go on living life as usual. The cross around our neck almost becomes fashion apparel. We might even hear someone say: "I love your cross. Is it a James Avery?" And the response: "Oh no, no.... even better, it's Michael Kors!"

When Mark wrote his Gospel somewhere around the year 64 in the Common Era, it was a time of great persecution. Large numbers of Christians were martyred by crucifixion. The church in Rome was shattered by these events. Mark's words to take up the cross were challenging if not frightening. Those words meant that Christians must be ready to face death, if need be, to proclaim their loyalty to Christ and to their fellow human beings. They were willing to forfeit life on earth in the assurance of gaining life eternal. In Mark's day, taking up one's cross could very well mean that you found yourself nailed to one.

In the history of the church during times of persecution, and sadly in those areas where this remains true even to this day, men and women face the choice of taking up the cross in self-sacrifice for Christ and the Gospel and for loving other human beings in ways Christian. It was clear to every martyr what Jesus meant when he said: "What does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?" For them, the world meant home, family, one's work, and safety ... a peaceful and contented life. All this, they were ready to sacrifice rather than be false to their commitment to Christ and His directive to love and serve other human beings.

God calls each of us to an abundant life. An abundant life is one marked by a precious balance. Taking up our cross is to jump into the calling to be authentic, balanced, creative, and alive as Spirit people. We have some choice in the matter as to the way to proceed. Some of these choices are difficult, no question. In regard to human ways, we can make choices that distort, and putrefy ... or we can move in cross-filled ways that attempt to balance, nurture, enliven, and empower. These ways of being give life rich meaning and value; people are treated as equals to each other, and are respected and protected as such. These are the promises and vows we make in our baptisms. Lent is the petri dish for the realization of these promises... for their nurture and study and how to maximize their growth. When a course to follow is dictated by our Sacred Myth, we can then pick up a cross in an attempt to have it pull us forward with moral courage.

This season of purple allows us every chance to see through the purple veil. There, the living body of Jesus takes in a deep breath and screams out, pulling itself off the nails that kept it down. When we jerk out the nails of our own fears, we practice those certain sacrifices that are sometimes needed for authenticity. This courage demands risk and it takes love. It gives us a chance to see if the flowing baptismal waters of our lives are freely flowing or if they are bottled up in some mason jar of our own making.

Soon we will enter the sacred space of the Eucharistic Prayer. I believe that Professor Marion Hatchett would say that the Eucharistic Prayer is the epi-center of where we always need to start. The church's tried and true liturgy will once again unite us together in the power and the presence and the mystery of Christ, who is always with us. The Eucharist reveals the Christ who paid the ultimate sacrifice for us on a cross so that we might have life and live that life more abundantly. As we pray, let us take up our cross and bid it drive us forward, within, through, and beyond this very Lent.