

Walk Before Me, Get Behind

There are passages in Scripture that are hard to preach and harder to hear. This morning's Gospel reading is one of them. Jesus and his followers are just beginning their final journey to Jerusalem. Jesus knows what will happen to him there, and he thinks the disciples should know, too. Peter is horrified. He takes Jesus aside and "begins to rebuke" him in private. Jesus brings the other disciples into the conversation and answers, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Harsh words for his closest friends. I'd love to believe Jesus didn't say them, but he probably did. Scholars agree that a Biblical event is more likely to have occurred, first, if it shows up in more than one Gospel and, second, if it's unflattering to someone. Mark and Matthew both report this conversation, and neither Peter nor Jesus covers himself in glory here, so the story is probably true. There's a difference between the two Gospels, though. Matthew doesn't say that Jesus turns to the other disciples, but Mark does. That suggests to me that Jesus is frustrated with all of them, not just Peter, because they're so obsessed with their earthly fears and ambitions that they're ready to defy the will of God.

Exasperated he may be, Jesus doesn't tell his disciples to leave him, as he sometimes does when he needs time alone to rest and pray. He tells them to get behind him. It's an odd turn of expression, and the exact opposite of what Adonai said to Abraham in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures: "walk before me, and be blameless." The two expressions form an interesting counterpoint, so let's see what they reveal when we examine them side by side.

Our translation of Genesis doesn't quite catch the sense of Adonai's words. The original Hebrew is *lephanay wehyeh tamim* (לְפָנַי וְהָיָה תָמִים). It literally means "walk in front of my face and be whole." There are variations; we could substitute "in my Presence" for "in front of my face." Medieval rabbi Rashi believed that "walk" really means "worship," so Adonai is

instructing Abraham to “worship in my Presence with integrity.” Regardless of the nuances in translation, Adonai is definitely telling Abraham to go front of the Divine presence. Why?

Despite Paul’s insistence that Abraham received God’s promise that he would “inherit the world ... through the righteousness of faith,” our patriarch isn’t a model of fidelity at this point in his story. It’s been twenty-five years since Adonai first promised to make Abraham the father of a great nation, thirteen years since Abraham and Sarah gave up hoping for divine intervention and arranged for Sarah’s maid, Hagar, to give Abraham a son. Taking matters into their own hands may be understandable, but it shows a lack of faith. Although Abraham becomes profoundly faithful over the course of his lifetime, he’s just learning here. Christian Hebrew scholar Chaim Bentorah believes that Adonai tells Abraham to walk before him just as a father teaches a child to walk by putting the child a few steps away, spreading his arms, and encouraging the child to come for a hug. The child instinctively walks toward the father, who catches the child if she starts to fall. Adonai wants Abraham, and all of us who are just learning to walk in righteousness, to go in front of him so he can lovingly catch us when we stumble.

By contrast, Jesus uses the Greek word *opiso* (ὀπίσω) when he tells the disciples to get behind him. *Opiso* can mean “behind,” and it can also mean “follow.” A little one just learning to walk wouldn’t be able to follow his father; he’d stumble and fall behind. Only a child who has learned how to walk can follow in her father’s footsteps and learn by mimicking his actions. So, when Jesus says, “get behind me,” perhaps he doesn’t mean “get out of my sight!” Perhaps he’s really telling the disciples to “follow me, and I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Jesus doesn’t really give the disciples a choice. When he calls the crowd to join them, Jesus says, “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” There’s no “if” when Jesus tells the disciples to get behind him. Their

decision to follow him has already been made. They'll have their own crosses to bear, lighter than his, but nonetheless a weight that they'll struggle to carry. So, when Jesus tries to tell them what's going to happen in Jerusalem, he's not just predicting his own suffering. He's trying to prepare them for what they, too, will have to endure.

When we think about the Crucifixion, we naturally focus on how much Jesus suffered for us. We also tend to fixate on how badly the disciples fell short at crucial moments. Although Judas' betrayal rightfully draws the most criticism, Peter's denial of Jesus comes a close second. Peter, James, and John all fell asleep when they should have stayed awake in Gethsemane. None of the disciples defended Jesus in his trials or stood by him at the cross. Their human weakness betrayed them, and they all had to deal with their crushing grief, guilt, and shame after Jesus's death. Jesus suffered the most, but the disciples suffered, too. They had their own crosses to bear, and none of them carried their burdens gracefully or well.

So, what does all of this mean for us? I think it means that God calls us to walk in the Divine presence however we can. Many of us can't yet follow in Jesus's footsteps, and that's okay. Abraham's story tells us that God watches over us as our loving father, urging us to come to him and catching us when we stumble. If Adonai's handpicked father of nations had to learn how to walk in faith, we can be forgiven for the occasional misstep. God isn't watching to condemn us, but to help us get back up and try again whenever we fall. All we have to do is ask for and accept his help.

And when we've learned the basics of walking in faith, we can start to follow Jesus. We won't do it perfectly – the disciples didn't, either. Jesus was very honest in warning them that the road they would travel together would be hard, and the one disciple who defected proves that Jesus wouldn't have stopped them if they chose to leave. He never interferes in free will. He

never condemned the disciples when they struggled with their burdens, though, and he won't condemn us when we sometimes have trouble carrying our own.

Now, about that cross... No one will ever carry a heavier cross than Jesus did because he carried his cross for the whole world, but everyone gets their share of sorrow. If you think you know someone who has never suffered, you don't know that person as well as you imagine. Nothing – not money, not power, not connections, not beauty, not intelligence – nothing exempts a person from pain. Everybody has been hurt, is hurting, or will hurt, probably many times over the course of a lifetime. We can waste our lives trying to escape from pain, numbing it with addictions or distracting ourselves with busyness and ambition. We can poison our souls with envy, imagining that others have suffered less than we have. Or we can resist self-pity, shoulder our pain, and follow in Jesus's footsteps, praising the Father for the opportunity to walk in faith and serve him by caring for one another as his beloved Son taught us to do.

Our Roman cousins sometimes offer up their suffering as a sacrifice to God. I have mixed feelings about that, because I don't believe God wants his children to suffer, especially when we bring our suffering on ourselves. I agree, though, that our pain takes on meaning when it inspires us to follow Jesus as faithful children of God. We're all going to suffer sometimes because that's what happens in life. But if we carry our burdens as best we can and ask Jesus for help when they get to be too much, we'll be able to stand before him when he comes in glory with the angels, no shame involved. And then, if we're really blessed, perhaps we won't have to choose anymore between toddling before him like clumsy infants or stumbling along behind him, struggling to carry vastly less trouble and pain than he carried for us. Perhaps we'll finally be able to cast our crosses aside as he cast his, and walk through eternity side by side with Jesus, our God, Redeemer and friend. *Amen.*