

A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 17A
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett
St. James' Church, Mt, Airy MD

For those of us whose faith isn't always rock steady, whose spiritual journey is full of ups and downs, by which I guess I mean all of us, Peter is our example and our hope.

Just last Sunday, we heard Jesus tell Peter he had received a revelation from God, was the rock on which Jesus' community would be founded, and keeper of the keys to heaven and earth; and this week, in the very next passage from Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus calling Peter "Satan", and rebuking him for standing in the way of God's work.

My own spiritual ups and downs, and I suspect yours, are not that momentous, or that extreme, but I certainly empathize with Peter. Nothing about his faith journey seems to be going the way he expected it to.

Peter has this sudden insight that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the hopeful prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures, that he is not just a great teacher and spiritually powerful person, but God in human form, come to set the world right according to divine plan.

And then that same person, God, Savior, teacher and friend, says that he must go into Jerusalem and die. No wonder Peter protests. That doesn't make any sense.

Either Jesus is the Messiah or Jesus is going to die, but how could both of those things be true?

And yet when Peter makes his very reasonable protest, Jesus starts calling him names.

What's going on here?

First, there's a language issue that trips us up a bit, and it's really our own fault.

We Christians have, over the centuries, turned "Satan" into a proper name. But in Jesus' day it was an ordinary word. It means "adversary." It could indicate your enemy, but it was also the word for the lawyer arguing the other side of a case.

And this is what Jesus is calling Peter out for – arguing the wrong side. And he wants Peter to "get behind him," to be on his side, to "have his back," as it were.

Peter needs to get behind Jesus so they are once again headed in the same direction.

Not that that direction is going to be an easy one to travel. Jesus knows that, and that is why he needs his friends to be on his side. The way of the cross is almost impossibly difficult, but to walk it alone is simply inhuman.

And we know that Peter doesn't walk that whole way with Jesus. His faith continues on its up and down path, so that he is sometimes with Jesus all the way and at other times consumed by fear, leaving Jesus to face his death surrounded by strangers.

And Peter's journey would end like that, in shame and sorrow and regret if it weren't for one thing.

That death, that thing that Peter says must not happen to Jesus; that Peter thinks God will forbid, is not the last word. It is not the end of the story.

It's not that Jesus doesn't die, it's that death isn't the end of the story.

Jesus comes back, and that changes everything for Peter.

Jesus comes back, and Peter, who will choose to walk his own way of the cross, doesn't have to walk the way alone.

Jesus says that there is a way of the cross for each of us who wants to follow him.

That's a hard thing to hear. That's a hard thing to accept. "Follow Jesus, suffer and die" is not an evangelism slogan that's likely to fill our pews or bring a lot of hope to our children.

But lucky for us, that's not what Jesus is really saying. What Jesus is telling Peter and us is that the way of the cross is not death but life.

The cross is the sign of the outcast. The cross, the method of execution for enemies of the state in ancient Rome, is the sign of being aligned with the powerless, the despised, the people who are made voiceless and even lifeless by the power and wealth of empire.

To take up the cross is to ally yourself with the powerless, to seek justice for the downtrodden, to speak up for the voiceless.

And, have no doubt, that way can lead to death. It did for Jesus. It did for Peter. It did for Martin Luther King Jr.. It did for many of the Christians in Syria this year. And for all we know, it might lead us to death as well. If we are to take our faith seriously, we have to acknowledge the fact that standing up and speaking out for justice for the powerless is likely to annoy the powerful, who are likely to use their power against you.

For most of Jesus' followers these days, though, death is not the sacrifice that is asked of us. Status, power, material well-being, comfortable existence – these are the things that we have to be willing to put on the line when we take up our own cross.

Still a hard sell, I know, but there are two things we are promised in return for that sacrifice that make it worthwhile.

First, we are promised Life. And Jesus isn't talking about just being alive, he's talking about capital L life. Life richly lived. Life that has meaning, Life that is full of joy even when times are bad. Life where every moment matters, and every day is worth a lifetime. Life that is rich and full now and lasts even beyond the grave.

And if that isn't enough to make us consider following Jesus, there is also the hope that Jesus' resurrection brings, which is that no matter what happens to us on that journey – blessings, losses, joys, sorrow – no matter what we have to face, Jesus,

not just alive, but full of that capital L life, is always with us. Wherever the way of the cross may take us, we never have to walk it alone.

Amen.