

Second Sunday of Lent – Year B

Earlier this week, I saw a clip from a new film, *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*. I haven't seen the film yet, and it's gotten very mixed reviews. One part of the story of Billie Holiday's life, though, is that she sang a song called, "Strange Fruit" – which depicted the lynching of blacks in the south in graphic terms. Holiday became known for singing the obviously controversial song – and many theorize that it was because she would not *stop* singing the song that the FBI and other agencies pursued legal cases against her – to get her to stop; to get that song "Strange Fruit" out of the spotlight. And that brings me to the clip – in which a white woman is speaking with Billie Holiday and says to her, "Then why don't you just stop singing the song?" Why don't you just stop singing the song?

This line jumped out at me, because I had been sitting with, chewing on, mulling over our gospel text for today. I could almost hear Peter – and others – saying to Jesus, "Why don't you just stop singing the song?"

Just a few verses before the passage we have today, Mark tells the story of Jesus asking the disciples what people think of him. Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" And they tell him, John the Baptist, or Elijah, or another prophet. And then he asks, "But who do *you* say that I am?" And Peter proclaims, "You are the Messiah! The Anointed One of God!"

We must remember here that the Jews were living under an oppressive foreign government at that time. The Romans were ruling. And so Peter and the other disciples – most likely *all* the Jews of that time - had their own ideas of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. The Messiah was going to restore the fortunes of Israel! The Messiah was going to use power and might to overthrow the Romans! That was *their* understanding of what it meant to be Messiah.

So it is no wonder, when Jesus starts to explain to them what Messiah *really* means – when Jesus lets them know that the road ahead holds suffering and death, not power and thrones – it is no wonder that Peter pulls him aside and tells him he has it all wrong!

I can hear Peter saying to Jesus – “if you know that’s what is waiting ahead of you, then why don’t you just stop singing the song? Why don’t you stop riling people up with your talk of God’s care for the poor and the outcast? Why don’t you stop talking about God’s love and mercy, instead of the law? Why don’t you just stop singing the song?”

And that’s when Jesus tells Peter, in harsh terms, “Get behind me, Satan!” – In other words, “Peter – what you’re saying is not from God. It is *you*, Peter, who has it all wrong.” Jesus tells Peter – and us – that we are looking at things with the values of society instead of with the values of God. “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

We are all too familiar with the “human things.” Power, wealth, domination, might makes right, me and mine first. And violence as the way to get it all, if need be. But what are the divine things, the divine values? We know those, too, even when we would rather *not*.

The divine values are what Jesus lays out in the gospel time and time again, in story after story. Forgiveness, mercy, justice, compassion, peace. And so the Messiah will not meet violence with violence, will not espouse hatred for anyone, will not preach that one group of people is better than another.

Jesus will not stop singing the song of God’s values, because he *cannot*. He *cannot* stop – because preaching and living the values of God, is who he is called to be – who he *is*. Jesus heard the voice from the cloud at his baptism – You are my beloved. Peter names him here, You are the Messiah. Jesus cannot stop living and speaking the good news of God present, caring for the poor and freeing the oppressed – because that is who he is, that is what it means to be – the Messiah – the Beloved of God -

In today’s gospel, we hear Jesus say, “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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

When someone asked Billie Holiday, “Why don’t you just stop singing the song?” – they were giving her a suggestion of how she might *save* her life – at least her life as she knew it, her *career*. Peter was asking Jesus to *save* his life – to stay out of trouble. If no one asked, people certainly *could* have asked Martin Luther King, Jr. if he couldn’t just tone things down a bit, stop trying to cross bridges, stop preaching non-violent change... And the answer from each of them would have been the same: What they were doing was what they felt called by God to do, the way to live out those values of God Jesus showed us in the gospels.

What Jesus is telling us is not that we need to go find ways to suffer, as a way of taking up our cross, but that we need to look at our deepest fear, our deepest pain, straight in the eye – as Rev. Amy Butler puts it – which is the “take up your cross” part – and then follow Jesus anyway.¹ Jesus did not let the fear of losing his life cause him to abandon who he was.

Our whole Christian faith is built on the paradox of the life of Jesus and the way of the cross. The king is born in a stable. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The way of the cross – that is, the intersection formed by meeting hatred with love – is the way to Life and real joy. If you want to save your life, you must lose it.

And so, the Messiah will lay down his life, will meet hatred with love, will confront violence with mercy. No, these are not “human” values – they are not the dominant values in our society. But they are the values, the “divine things” we must choose if we really want to be followers of Jesus.

The bottom line is this: Our faith is in a God who has been in covenant with us from the days of Abraham and Sarah – who, as Paul said in the letter to the Romans, were “fully convinced that God was able to do what [God] had promised.” We believe in a God who revealed, through Jesus, that the heart of God is love, that the Divine values are compassion and mercy and justice. Upholding those values, in a time when deceit and violence and abuse of power are all around us – upholding those values is the cross Jesus invites us to take up. How we do that may be different for each of us. The place where we are called to lay down our lives may be in the kitchen or the bedroom, the boardroom or the classroom. But we are called to take up our cross every time we have the opportunity to confront injustice and lies and hatred with the truth of the promise that God is love, and we are *all* God’s beloved. We cannot just stop singing the song, because the song is who we are.

The reflections in *Living Well Through Lent* this week offer some practical ways to listen for the voice, the song of God, within us – what they call “contemplative practices.” - In the quiet, we have the opportunity to both hear God call us by name, and to respond – to ask for the grace to continue to live the life of God within us. Because it takes courage and faith and grace to believe in the promise, and to keep on singing the song of the ways of God. Let us pray that grace for ourselves – and for one another.

- [Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16](#)
- [Romans 4:13-25](#)
- [Mark 8:31-38](#)
- [Psalm 22:22-30](#)

ⁱ Butler, Amy. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b14-second-sunday-lent-year-b/>