

Discipleship Verbs – A Sermon for Lent II [Slide 1]

Scripture: Mark 8

Last week during my less-scripted sermon time, I introduced you to a bible-reading strategy that I learned from preaching professor Anna Carter Florence. That strategy was to “read the verbs,” and let the verbs draw you into the script, the performative dimension of the scriptures, so that you can find your place there too. Several verbs stood out to us last week as we explored the passage from Mark chapter one where Jesus journeyed from the water to the wilderness: [SLIDE 2] verbs like “descended,” “baptized,” “torn,” “drove” or “cast out,” “tempted,” and “waited on.” There were also a number of questions we explored as we looked at our passage, questions like: [SLIDE 3]

Who (in the story) gets what verbs?; What’s the order of those verbs?; What do the verb tense and mood tell you?; and What do the verbs stir or evoke in you? What do you remember about them from the times you or others have played them?”

My sense from the responses that I heard afterwards was that “reading the verbs” in this passage was a helpful exercise in the context of worship. I felt encouraged by this, and so I took with me this focus on reading the verbs into my reading of Mark 8 for this morning as well, but this time I decided to focus on another question that Anna Carter Florence asks in her book, a question that we didn’t look at last week. That question is this: [SLIDE 4]

Do any of the verbs surprise you? Why? What were you expecting?

I like this question a lot. It is one that I think the disciples in our text for today might have suggested we consider as we listen to Jesus’ words for us on this Lenten journey. I suspect that if we could have interviewed the disciples after the incident recorded in Mark 8, they would have mentioned a number of “verbs” that Jesus used when he described his mission and their calling as disciples that surprised them. Here are some of the verbs from our scripture passage that may

have surprised them: [SLIDE 5] “suffer greatly,” “be rejected,” “be killed,” “rise again,” “deny,” and “take up.” In our experiencing the story for today, we got to witness how a number of the verbs Jesus and his disciples embodied in their journeys “On the road” before the incident in Mark 8, impacted the disciples’ expectations about what to “expect” next on their journeys with Jesus. Up until Mark 8, the disciples had experienced the verbs of miraculous “healings” and “the blessings and provisions of food for the crowds,” and Jesus’ profound “teachings”; these were glorious verbs, and attractive at that. Jesus must have been amazing to follow around – it’s no wonder that Peter was led to his confession of Jesus as Messiah. But I think the verbs that came after Peter’s confession must have come as a surprise to the disciples, for it was not long after Peter had spoken the words about Jesus: “You are the Messiah,” that Jesus “rebukes.” [SLIDE 6] First Jesus rebukes the disciples [“sternly ordered”], telling them to *not* speak about Peter’s confession. What a strange encounter - Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah and Jesus tells him and the rest of the disciples *to zip it*. Woah. “Why the rebuke, Lord?” “Can’t confession be my verb!” “What gives?” The disciples are confused at this rebuke, as are we. They didn’t expect it. If we were in their shoes, we wouldn’t have expected it.

Ever the Rabbi, Mark records Jesus’ response to what must have been the disciple’s confusion: he begins teaching them. But what Jesus teaches them is equally surprising. He teaches them the verbs that await him: he will suffer, be rejected, and be killed, and after three days to rise again. “Suffer,” “be rejected,” “be killed,” and “rise again.” Clearly some of the disciples did not expect these verbs—Peter certainly didn’t—because he met Jesus’ initial rebuke and subsequent teaching about his future suffering with a rebuke of his own. Mark, like a stage director, describes the physical movements and positioning of Peter and Jesus, noting that Peter takes Jesus aside, away from the larger group. Then it is *Peter* who rebukes Jesus: “No way.

Forget it. This won't happen to you!" Mark interrupts this dramatic moment of dialogue between Peter and Jesus to note a change in Jesus' position. Not content to respond to Peter in this little private side-conversation, Mark says that Jesus turns back to the larger group – but even as he turns to the larger group, he still addresses Peter with perhaps the most biting verb in this section: [SLIDE 7] "Get behind me" – and along with that biting verb, a pretty harsh noun to go with it: "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus speaks an imperative verb to Peter – Peter now playing the part of Satan, the accuser Jesus had been tempted by in the wilderness. "Get behind me," now *that* was an unexpected verb. In this one compressed encounter, we have a confession of Jesus as Messiah and three rebukes, two of them from Jesus, the last one the most biting of all.

I tend to think the disciples were blindsided by this whole encounter. But this packed moment of dialogue doesn't end there - Jesus doesn't stop with that rebuke. Again, Mark describes Jesus' movements. Having moved from a private side conversation with Peter to address his disciples, he now directs this next part of his speech beyond the small band of disciples to what we now understand is a larger crowd present as well. And then he speaks about what I like to call "discipleship verbs" (X2) – verbs meant to give the disciples a picture of what following the Messiah looked like: [SLIDE 8]

If any want to become my followers, let them **deny** themselves and **take up** their cross and follow me.

As you might have noticed from the children's time, this is a hard teaching – a hard teaching to teach about, let alone live out! On the surface, Jesus seems to call his disciples to reject one's own aspirations and desires and in turn willingly embrace what will surely be a difficult path, a path of suffering. Maybe that really is what is going on and there's no way to soften it – Jesus' words often resist being softened and are often meant to scandalize. Maybe discipleship really is just this, then: to deny ourselves, our needs and our wants and our personal aspirations, and take

up a path that leads to suffering and rejection in a world bent on the endless aspirations of wealth and well-being that comes all too-often at the expense of others. “There’s no way around it,” we hear Jesus saying, “discipleship is costly.”

On the other hand, I don’t think Jesus thought self-denial and suffering were good in themselves. I like to think that the Jesus who cared for the well-being of others – the Jesus who healed and danced in the streets, who fed and taught the crowds – was the same Jesus who called disciples to follow that example. I like to think the Jesus who was present at and indeed, even provided extra wine for the wedding at Cana, valued the joy that comes from fellowship and food and celebration. I also like to think that Jesus cared for his own well-being by practicing healthy boundaries – by taking time by himself to rest and reflect away from the crowds that demanded his attention. So, what to make, then, of the discipleship verbs he gave to his disciples: **deny yourself** and **take up your cross**?

As participants in the drama today, I think we need to interpret Jesus’ discipleship verbs in light of the rebuke that Jesus had just given to Peter. Perhaps Jesus described discipleship with these verbs in that moment because he saw all too well the way that human aspirations and desires could be bent towards self-preservation and selfish needs, no matter how “just” and “right” the cause seemed. Peter, it seems to me, desired a Messiah who would guarantee his security and wellbeing – after all, if Jesus was the victorious Messiah who healed and fed the crowds, and if *Peter* was the disciple of this Messiah, think of the power, prestige, and security that might seem to bring. But Jesus needs to help Peter understand his mission within a broader perspective, almost as if saying: “Peter, I call you to a ministry of healing, and community, and feeding others for their well-being, but ours is a world where such a ministry is time and time again pushed back against and rejected; rejected by others, but rejected too by our own desire for

self-preservation at all costs. I wonder if Jesus chose these discipleship verbs, not only because they mirrored what he saw to be his own path, but because he saw prototypically in Peter, just how much all his disciples would be challenged by the task of discipleship, a task filled with moments of joy and fellowship and well-being, yes, but a task also touched and impacted by the pain that comes with “raging in the streets” in the pursuit of justice and healing, a pursuit that calls us to let go of what we grasp onto so tightly.

So much could be said about these verbs, “deny” and “take up,” but I suspect that the true work of saying more about them will come not from me up here, but from all of our participation in the drama of discipleship. So today, I don’t leave you with any particular admonitions for what God is calling us to deny or what God is calling us to take up. Rather, I leave us on the road during this Lenten journey with several questions that arise out of the surprising discipleship verbs of the Messiah: [SLIDE 9]

What part of yourself is Jesus calling you to deny as you follow him?

Is there a part of our life together is Jesus calling us to deny as we follow him?

What difficult, even risky, task is Jesus asking you to “take up” as you follow him?

What difficult, even risky, task is Jesus asking our congregation to “take up” as we follow him?

I will keep these questions up on the screen for a minute and we can reflect, before having our hymn of response, a hymn repeating Jesus’ call to us to be his disciples.

AMEN