

Worship at home
Sunday, February 21, 2021
First Sunday in Lent

Call to worship:

Surely, he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.¹

Hymn #353 “Hail, our once-rejected Jesus”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9emLPUmNP_0

(St. Andrew's, Owen Sound)

¹ Isaiah 52: 13; 53:4-6, 12b.

Prayers of praise and confession:

Good and gracious God,
we praise you for the beauty of the created world,
and for the hope of life with you now and always.
We praise you for your faithfulness and loving kindness
throughout all generations,
for your promise of grace,
for your compassion and redemption revealed to us in Christ Jesus.
Receive our prayer and praise this day
and teach us how to live by your love.

O God, you made a covenant with us in faithfulness,
but we confess we are not always so faithful to you.
We grow tired and restless when things don't go our way.
We lose patience with others.
We lack compassion for our neighbours in need,
and even forget to express our love for those closest to us.
Although you have borne our iniquities and make intercession for us,
we continue to sideline you for the sake of other pursuits.
We fail to speak openly of our trust in you and your gospel.
Forgive us, gracious God.
Lead us in the way we should go
for the sake of Christ, our Lord. Amen.²

Assurance:

Believe the good news. Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God has come near.
Trust in his forgiving love for you, and forgive one another in his name.³

² Adapted from worship resource for February 21, 2021 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

³ Ibid.

The Word of God read and interpreted

Embracing the necessary season: The Cost

Today is the first Sunday in the 40-day season of Lent (omitting Sundays.)

We're going to spend the next few weeks in chapters 8-10 of Mark's gospel. These chapters are set between two stories of Jesus restoring sight to people who were blind. Three times between these two episodes, Jesus tried to teach his disciples about the necessity of his condemnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. And about the similar cost required by those who would follow him. Unlike the blind men, the disciples never quite *see* Jesus' point.

One reason for keeping the season of Lent year after year is that it gives us the opportunity to hear Jesus' words again in the hopes that, this year, we'll start to see clearly!

Our reading for today is set immediately after Jesus restored the sight to the blind man in Bethsaida and then went on to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

READ MARK 8:27-38.

Caesarea Philippi was located at the four headwaters of the Jordan River. During the era of the Greek empire and the spread of Hellenistic cult and culture, the region was known by the name Paneas after the Greek god Pan. Pan was the god of shepherds, wild places, mountains, and rustic improvised music. Pan is credited with creating the panpipes and is often portrayed in art holding a set. In the rocky hillsides that are a feature of the region around Paneas is a cave that contains a seemingly bottomless pit filled with water. Water was believed to be a means of accessing the underworld and the bottomless nature of this pool confirmed it. It was here, at this grotto in Paneas that it was believed Pan would over-winter. And here, at the gates of the underworld, Pan was worshipped with music, dance, boisterousness, and acts of fertility.

During the Roman era, the city was rebuilt by the tetrarch Philip in honour of the Caesar. Philip named it Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from other cities named for the Caesar. In front of the grotto to Pan, his father, Herod the Great, had built a temple to Caesar Augustus and the city was established as the political capital for the area. As well as promoting the Roman practice of worshipping the Caesar as a demigod, as the son of the gods.

This was Gentile territory. A center of Roman imperial power. A center of Roman emperor worship. And of the Greek worship of Pan.

It was here that Jesus went with his disciples.

And here, at the intersection of imperialism and paganism; at the intersection of the worship of political power and of the gods of nature, Peter confessed that Jesus, the son of Mary, the adopted son of Joseph, is *the* Son of the Living God; the Son of humanity; the Messiah.

Not Caesar. Not Herod. Not Pan. Jesus.

In Matthew's gospel, chapter 16, Matthew provided some additional information. Before his command to silence, Jesus praised Peter's confession and then said: "on *this* rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."⁴ In other words, the community that will reveal the nearness of the kingdom of God and will testify to the salvation that Yahweh brings will be built not on the rocks around the shrine to Pan nor with those that built Caesar's temple, but on the confession that Jesus is the Messiah. And the gates of the underworld, the grotto of Pan will not prevail against it.

This is a story of competing beliefs, values, and loyalties. We've seen this already when we began our study into Mark's gospel. A *gospel* is the good news of the triumph of one ruler over another. Mark's account begins with the line: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Over and against the Caesars, the Herods, the Pans, even the Self, *Jesus* has reclaimed and is restoring his creation. Jesus has triumphed.

Against this backdrop of imperialism and paganism Jesus warned that these are competing ways of going about life and the general public will not accept Peter's proclamation. If you truly believe and live by the belief that Jesus is *the* Messiah, you will be ridiculed, shunned, perhaps even martyred. If you believe and live by the belief that over and against the political powers and popular beliefs, Jesus is *the* Son of God and that the ways and means of *his* kingdom are the ways and means of salvation, you will be opposed.

Following Jesus is ultimately the good way, but it is not always the safe way. There is a cost.

⁴ Matthew 16:18

Perhaps you've heard or even used the phrase: "We all have our crosses to bear."

It is usually used in reference to some general suffering or trial. And as unpleasant as such hardship might be, that is usually a misuse of the phrase. The cross which Jesus evoked was not the hardship of human life, but the particular suffering with which we are faced in this age *as a result* of our unashamed loyalty to Jesus and our unashamed commitment to the ways and means of the kingdom of God.

It is the consequence of denying the kingdoms – whether of Caesar, Herod, Pan, or the Almighty Self – which claim salvation can be affected by any means other than the cross.

Because the kingdom of God exists against, alongside, and within these other, it is the cross of opposition; the cross of family and friends thinking you strange or misguided; it is the cross of martyrdom, whether metaphorical or physical.

For many Christians in North America and in Western societies, we have not had to carry that cross for many years. So, we soften Jesus' words. We use them as a cheer to help us persevere in difficult seasons. However, as we look towards the darkness of Good Friday, the necessary season of Lent provides an opportunity to hear again Jesus' words in their abruptness:

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

"those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The oft-quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die."

An interesting story was circulated that during the time of Jesus' life – and some even believe that it corresponded with his death on the cross – a sailor received a message that when he reached his next port of call, he was to make it known that the great god Pan had died. We can imagine the followers of Jesus hearing the news on Saturday morning that the great rabbi Messiah Jesus had died. Just like the Caesars, just like the Herods, just like the Pans. And we can then imagine the relief they would have experienced on Sunday or Monday or Tuesday when they heard the news that the gates of the underworld couldn't prevail against the Son of God! Unlike Pan, Jesus lives!

As much opposition as the disciples must have encountered for propagating the belief that Jesus is the Christ, imagine how much ridicule they suffered when they then began telling people that the man they saw hanging on the cross, lives!

Or, maybe you don't have to imagine it. How much ridicule do you face when you tell someone you believe that there is a Holy God; that there is sin; and that sin has been forgiven by a man crucified on a cross? When you tell them that you believe that this man who was nailed to a cross 2,000 years ago lives and that he and his way is the means to the salvation of creation?

Lent is a time for fasting, for repentance in mind and heart as well as in body, and for introspection. To that end, three questions come to mind from this scripture:

- Am I willing to believe that Jesus is *the* Messiah on his terms?
- Am I willing to believe that Jesus' ways and means while not always safe, are good and trustworthy?
- Am I willing to lose my security for the sake of Christ and for the sake of his gospel?

Hymn #672 "Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3kZlrMyEvE>

(St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Nashville, TN)

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession:

As we enter into this holy season, Lord God,
we give you thanks for your promise of new life that sustains us,
especially as these months of pandemic stretch on.

We thank you:

For tiny signs of hope, even in a bleak landscape or on challenging day;
For glimpses of beauty in a smile or a ray of sunshine;
For scientific achievements that ease suffering;
For the people who support and serve others in times of weakness or loss;
For the chance to recover from mistakes, to begin again.
Lord of life, sustain us with your presence
and give us patience and perseverance as we await the future with you.

Trusting your promise of new life, it is with hope that we pray:

For anyone we have hurt by harsh words or careless deeds;

(Hold a silence)

For those known to us who are carrying heavy burdens;

(Hold a silence)

For all who are seeking employment or worry about their businesses;

(Hold a silence)

For teachers, students and school administrators managing so many challenges this year;

(Hold a silence)

For troubled places in our world and those who work for reconciliation and understanding;

(Hold a silence)

For our congregation and all churches seeking new ways to minister in these months of distancing from each other;

(Hold a silence)

For ourselves and those lives closely connected to ours;

(Hold a silence)

Renew our health and hope for the future you will bring us through the courage and compassion of Christ our Lord, as we pray together the words he taught us:⁵

The Lord's Prayer

Video music: "Lord, who throughout these forty days"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzqjglKoEpU>

(Advent Birmingham)

Commissioning and blessing

Go with the example of the apostles:

be with Jesus,
proclaim the nearness of his kingdom,
heal the sick,
cast out demons in his name.

Go in the assurance that whatever the cost,
Jesus is willing and able to sustain his disciples.

And may the grace, mercy, and peace of God
the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with us now
and forevermore.

Amen.

⁵ Adapted from worship resource for February 21, 2021 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>