

“Do You Know Your Place?”
“Rend Your Hearts: Claiming the Promise” Sermon Series
Genesis 17:1-7, Mark 8:31-38
February 28, 2021

In Alaskan sled dog racing circles people are fond of saying something that has obvious truth to it:

“If you aren’t the lead dog, the scenery never changes.”

In other words, the lead dog gets to see what’s up ahead. As the leader of the pack, he’s the only dog that gets to choose the path. All the others can do is follow; and all they can see is the tail-end of the dog ahead.

So, it’s no wonder that in life there are many people who strive to be the “lead dog.”

Whether it’s the fans of sports teams chanting, “We’re number 1! Or, business leaders and politicians doing everything they can to be “on top,” the mantra of our day is to be, “large and in charge.”

During the American Revolutionary War, Thomas Paine wrote: “Lead me, follow me, or get out of my way.” Of course, people are more familiar with General George Patton’s crass modification of Paine’s declaration, mainly because Patton’s leadership tactics and style tended to be very direct, even abrasive and arrogant.

But leaders of all types have subscribed to his philosophy of leadership because of the victorious results he achieved in modern warfare.

Who doesn’t want to chart our own destiny?

Who doesn’t want to chose our life pathway? Who doesn’t want to decide for oneself? The problem for Christians is that Jesus had a rather startling response to that kind of an attitude: “Get behind me, Satan!”

That comes as a bit of a shock to our sensibilities, doesn’t it? I mean, why would Jesus say something so drastic to Peter?

As we walk through this season of Lent, we are making the effort to be mentally, emotionally, and spiritually ready for the events leading up to the Crucifixion.

In today's text from Mark's Gospel, Jesus is attempting to do that for His first century followers.

Remember, they have no way of knowing what we know. When Jesus tells them, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed," it's a total shock to THEIR sensibilities... They absolutely do NOT have any knowledge or understanding that the story has a GOOD ending, like we do.

Jesus said this simply and clearly so they couldn't miss it. But Peter grabbed him in protest... Peter was the captain of the disciple team. This was NOT good leadership by him to rebuke HIS higher up.

Jesus saw the rest of the disciples wavering and wondering what to believe... They were beginning to question who they were following.

So Jesus confronted Peter. He returned the rebuke, firmly saying:

"Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works." (Mk 8:33 MSG)

"Peter, get out of my way! Get behind me!" That sounds a lot like Thomas Paine and General Patton. Except that Jesus doesn't bother to say, "Lead me, follow me."

At first Jesus' harsh "rebuke" of Peter DOES shock our senses, but then the shock begins to wear off as we recall that Peter was prone to make rash mistakes. He was passionate in his faith in God and his love of Jesus... and he didn't always carefully consider the possible consequences of his actions.

In this case, Peter had the audacity to try to tell Jesus that he was wrong, so we're OK with Jesus rebuking him.

The thing is, it is another thing to have Jesus' words directed at each one of us, reminding twenty-first century disciples that none of us are "lead dogs," that none of us get to be "large and in charge."

As Jesus' disciples we are reminded by today's gospel text to "know our place."

Where's our place?

Following Peter's insolence, Jesus calls the crowd to join His disciples, He said, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; *I Am*. (Mk. 8:34 MSG)

Jesus continues on, teaching us all what it means to follow Him:

"Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for? (Mk. 8:35-37 MSG)

Our place is "behind Jesus." We must "get behind" Jesus, our leader. In this community of Christ, there is only one Leader: Jesus. The rest of us are called to be followers.

Apostle Paul led by example. He wrote: "Follow me as I follow Christ."

That seems to contradict our Old Testament text in which "The Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless." (Gen. 17:1 NRSV)

God says, "Walk before me." Jesus says, "Get behind me!"

Which is right? NOW are you feeling like Jesus' disciples who were: "wavering, and wondering what to believe." ?

They're both right. When the Lord tells us, "Walk before me," we are being instructed to put our faithfulness and loyalty to the Lord on DISPLAY. It means to make sure our actions properly REPRESENT our covenantal relationship with God. "Walk before me," is what the song "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love," is all about.

And, if we are true to that relationship, they we will willfully and joyfully...
FOLLOW JESUS.

Even after twenty-one centuries of trying, it is hard for us to "get behind Jesus" and follow Him. We may be willing to "take up our cross." But we would still like to "take the lead" on that journey.

Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah. But his first response to this newly identified Messiah was to try and tell Him what He can and cannot do!

In other words, Peter tried to lead Jesus in the direction he thought Jesus should go rather than follow Jesus where the Father was leading him.

In Jesus' passion prediction Peter heard a message that was so completely unexpected, a messianic mission so radical, that he decided Jesus was wrong. The Christ, the chosen one of God, the "Beloved Son," the Incarnation of the divine presence, "God with us," was wrong.

Peter puts himself and all his preconceived messianic hopes in the driver's seat, and then tries to throw Jesus and all God's plans for salvation into the back seat.

Peter wants nothing less than to be in control — in control of his life, in control of Jesus' life, in control of God's plans for all life. No wonder Jesus doesn't mince words — "Get behind me, Satan!"

In trying to be a backseat driver, Peter is thwarting Christ's mission in the world.

Jesus' flat-out response to Peter makes a poignant point: If you try and drive from the back seat you will die. You will lose your life by trying to save it. It is only in following, in letting Jesus have the driver's seat, that our lives are saved and assured.

The problem is, there aren't many things that rankle our spirit and yank our chain quite as much as being told to "know your place."

"Know Your Place." The world uses that phrase to relegate some people to second-class or even third class status.

Do you think it is "second class" to be the first one sent out into the world for an all-out divine assault on sin, evil and death?

Do you think it is "second class" to live sinless and blameless and yet be ridiculed, rejected, judged and condemned, and nailed to the cross to die?

Do you think it is "second class" to be the one to descend into hell and break apart Satan's stronghold with the power of your grace and goodness?

Do you think it is “second class” to be the one to overpower the grip of sin and death on all humanity and rise from the grave as a sign of death’s defeat?

Do you think it is “second class” to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty?

Do you think it is “second class” for you and God the Father, the Creator of the Universe, to be wholly united in mind and spirit?

Do you think it is “second class” to want “your place” to be a place of sanctuary and salvation, preserved and protected by the power of Christ’s grace and love?

Do you think it is “second class” to be saved from sin, called to ministry and commissioned to a mission in the world . . . in Jesus’ name?

That is “the place” Jesus asks his disciples to occupy until he comes.

There is troubling news in today’s lesson. . . But, there is also Good News.

The trouble is, “The Son of Man will be killed.”

The Good News is, “after three days He will rise again.”

Jesus is saying to you and me today, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Do you know your place?

Then, get behind Him.

Behind Him is where we will be guided by grace, fueled by fearlessness, and emblazoned with beauty . . . the beauty of Jesus.