

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

February 28, 2021
Second Sunday in Lent, Year B

The readings this week:

- **Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16** ◦ **Psalm 22:23-31**
- **Romans 4:13-25** ◦ **Mark 8:31-38**



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

A Different Kind of Denial

I have to admit. I was a bit baffled this week by the relationship between the Gospel and the first and second lessons. Not that we have to make a connection every time, that's for sure. But you never know what interpretive gem might come surface when you put texts in conversation, which is why the lectionary frequently fascinates me.

But I stuck with it for a while, and here's what I started seeing. Abraham and Sarah? To what extent they "deny themselves" just as Jesus asks. But it's not a denial of the self. It's a denial of remaining by themselves. That is, they deny a life that is autonomous, secured, enclosed, safe, and just the two of them, for a life that propels them into relationship — with God and with a future realized by abounding relationship.

I wonder if this is exactly what Jesus means. Because I have to say "deny yourselves" has always been problematic for me. Rubs against my incarnational theology that says who I am matters to God. And Jesus wants me to deny that? No thanks. I've worked really hard to be me. I'm not giving that up now. And denial is ever so popular during Lent. So we jump on the denial bandwagon and give up all and sundry aspects of our lives that actually might simply give us joy.

Moreover, I think way too much of that kind of denial happens in church... You know what I mean. To be someone or something you are not. To eschew your truth for the sake of the truth of the Gospel...

So, what if we take deny "yourself" totally literally? Hang in with me here.

That is, you deny your selfhood when it rescinds relationship. You deny your autonomy when it refuses community. You deny your individualism when it rejects intimacy.

To "deny yourself and take up your cross" invites us into what the cross can also mean — not just death and suffering, but God choosing human relationships. The cross represents God's commitment to humanity. The cross represents what we do when we are not in relationship with the other and think only for ourselves. Because to be ourselves is to be certain of our connectedness.

I think that's what Jesus is saying. At least today I do. Because Lent cannot be just about yourself. Somehow, you have defined your identity as that which is connected to Christ and to a community of believers. We don't do Lent alone. Lent is this radical communal experience in many ways. People willing to wear crosses on their foreheads when buying groceries. People willing to talk about their Lenten disciplines — out loud, even to strangers.

Why? Because we realize it's not just about our own selves. Lent is a denial of the self in the best way, the self that refuses community. The self that thinks it can survive on its own. The self that rejects the deep need of humanity — belonging.

Jesus' charge is not a demand to deny your true self. It's an invitation to imagine that your self needs the other. Desperately. Intimately. Because this is what to be human is all about — intimacy. Belonging. Relationship. Attention. To what extent we barely know ourselves without all of the above in our lives, without others in our lives acknowledging, regarding who we are. We can't be ourselves on our own. And when we do, it is a self-absorbed existence. It is to become narcissistic in its truest form, where those around you are only pawns to placate your self-perceived power and importance...

And we have seen it. Perhaps even done it. So here is our chance. To deny the impulses that demand reliance on ourselves alone and seek the help of others. To deny the expectations that suggest ministry is a singular existence that works out of some sort of skewed assertions that we have all the answers. To deny the temptations that try desperately to convince us of our own worth without the call of God we initially heard.

The denial of self? It's embracing the truth that you can't live in this world, you can't live your life, without your self being in relationship.

A different kind of denial indeed.

~ an excerpt,
Karoline Lewis,
[Working Preacher](#)



Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16](#)

What has been passed down to you in the form of promise? God changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. What does it say about God? What does it say about the relationship between God and Abraham and Sarah? If we think about who normally gives people their names, does it make a difference in our answer here? God outlines a number of benefits of the covenant God is establishing with Abraham. Does Abraham go along with this covenant with God "because of" those benefits? What are the benefits? What if the only benefit of the covenant were that God would be Abraham's and his descendants' God? Would the covenant be equally attractive? Why? How are you part of God's covenant today? [Huffington Post, Matters of Interpretation](#)

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 22:23-31](#)

Why does it hurt when a friend rejects you or turns a cold shoulder? If you were to host a feast to celebrate God's grace and mercy to you, what would you say in proposing a toast to our King? Even though David was describing his own suffering, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was also prophetically describing Christ's suffering. Why, specifically, did God forsake Jesus? Why is it important to remember this? When you are overcome with grief and feeling abandoned even by God, how does it help to know that Jesus also experienced despair and abandonment? What does this fact give you permission to do? [Tuesday Cafe](#)

Praying Toward Sunday

Oh, God of love, power and faithfulness,
We journey with your son, ever closer to Jerusalem,
to his cross his true destiny.
We hear his words "Take up your cross and follow me," but we aren't sure if it's the crosses of this life,
or the actual cross of death.

We hear his words, "deny your self," and wonder which self it is; the self we put on for others,
or the self centered self that wants it all for ourselves?
Whichever it is, it seems like Jesus sure is asking a lot of us and we aren't sure we can do this.

God we will need your holy spirit to be able to do this. We will need your grace and mercy to be able to do this. We remember that you empowered your disciples, the early Christians and others who decided to follow you, we believe that you will do likewise for us. Amen.

~ [RevGalBlogPals](#)

Peter is the foil in Mark's Gospel. He not only plays the fall guy for various misunderstandings, failings, and general dunderheadedness, but by doing so, he stands in for you and me. Peter's illusions represent ours.

In today's Gospel, Jesus decides it's about time to prepare his closest friends for what will happen in Jerusalem. "No no no no," says Peter, master of platitudes. "That will never happen to youuuu."

Jesus looks at the other disciples. Then he looks at Peter. And calls him Satan. He says, "You think as the world thinks." Jesus has been fighting the way the world thinks all through Mark's Gospel. The conflict is partially within himself.

Not only will Jesus have to take up his cross - you and I will. There's no nicer, refined, more reasonable way, even if we carefully surround ourselves solely with nice, refined, reasonable churchy people.

For true life requires complete surrender to it. And what will be the point of gaining the whole world by thinking as the world thinks, if it means falling short of true life?

~ Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

3rd Reading: [Romans 4:13-25](#)

How have you seen God do the seemingly impossible in your life or the lives of others? It's easy to think that we must follow a lot of rules and do good things in order to be accepted by God, rather than trusting in his grace. How would you explain faith in God's grace and promises to someone struggling with this concept? [The Episcopal Church](#)

4th Reading: [Mark 8:31-38](#)

Do you think the Church today tries to make the Christian life attractive to potential believers? Should we? What is the significance of Peter's realization of Jesus' identity in verses 27-30? Peter recognized that Jesus was the Messiah, but apparently did not think that Messiah should suffer and die. What different ideas might Peter have had about the Messiah? Do you criticize Peter's inability to grasp what Jesus was saying? Look back at the miracles from this and previous chapters. If you had recently witnessed these miracles, would you believe a man like this could die? What might it mean to "deny ourselves?" Is Jesus saying we should give up physical comforts? Give up our identity? Something else? Jesus speaks of trying to "save our lives." How do we do this? What things do we sometimes hold onto, as if they could "save" us? How then could we "lose" our life for Jesus and for the sake of the gospel? How does this fit with "taking up our cross?" [Faith Element](#)