**On the Way to Discipleship - Lent 4**

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**NPMC – March 22, 2020**

*Scripture: Mark 14:17-42*

*Hymns: Sing the Journey 54 - Longing for Light, Sing the Journey 98 - All Will Be Well, and HWB 526 - In the Rifted Rock I'm Resting*

Good morning to you. As we meet for worship across the distance, God is here among us.

It’s been quite a week, hasn’t it? As we have adjusted to the calls to “flatten the curve” and practice “social distancing,” as we look at the growing list of events and gatherings that have been cancelled, as we look ahead at several weeks of homeschooling children, working from home, and/or self-isolating due to travel or respiratory symptoms, this whole COVID-19 situation can seem really disconcerting. This is uncharted territory, and we’re trying to do our part and navigate all of this the best we can. And yet, even in all of the uncertainty of these days, I’ve been drawn to the words of thirteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich, who said, “All will be well, and all will be well, all manner of things will be well.” We may not know what lies ahead, but we can concentrate on doing what we can, and on supporting one another in creative ways when we cannot meet in person.

 Our Scripture passage from Mark 14 spoke to me this week as a profound reflection for a time such as this. As we reach these last few chapters of Mark’s Gospel, this is a time of crisis for Jesus and his closest friends – their movement as they knew it is unraveling; Jesus’ ministry is falling apart. There is very little certainty about what it will look like, about whether it even has a future, by the end of this chapter. All of their expectations have been turned upside-down. The disciples are scattered and set adrift by the events of this chapter. Sound a bit familiar?

 Our reading for today begins with Mark’s account of the Last Supper, which is of course their celebration of the Jewish feast of Passover. And it ends up being a very solemn meal, where the conversation centres around betrayal. As soon as the twelve male disciples are seated with him at the table, Jesus brings up a very disturbing topic of table conversation: “one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” And none of them can believe that such a thing would happen, that any of them would stoop so low. They are upset at the mere idea of this, and say, “I would never do that, Jesus!” But Jesus insists that one of the twelve, one of the group that has been like family to each other, will betray him. And Jesus curses his betrayer harshly, though, unlike some of the other gospel accounts, he doesn’t seem to identify him as Judas Iscariot here in Mark’s version of the story.

 After they have eaten what we think of as the first Communion meal and sung a hymn together, Jesus again turns to the topic of betrayal, saying that it’s not just one of them who will betray him – all of the Twelve will desert him like sheep whose shepherd has been “struck” (v. 27). And Peter – dear, overconfident Peter – stands up and says that he would never betray Jesus, even if all of the other disciples do. He’s the exception to their weakness. But Jesus contradicts him, saying, “this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” Peter insists again that that won’t happen – “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all the other disciples follow Peter’s lead and make the same claim (v. 30-31).

 Now we know the end of this story, which means we know how wrong the disciples are here. By the end of chapter 14, Jesus’ prediction has already come true – all of these disciples, who promised never to leave him, have abandoned him. Peter, who was the most adamant of all, has denied him no less than three times. When push comes to shove – when things become difficult – they let Jesus down, and fail to live as he has taught them all this time. These promises never to leave Jesus turn out to be just empty posturing. Theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder says that the disciples’ “self-confidence is almost amusing” as they “insist on their own ability to withstand temptation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Ched Myers goes so far as to call this whole chapter “a pathetic litany of failed discipleship.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

 What’s interesting about Mark’s Gospel is that this isn’t something new in his portrayal of the Twelve disciples. They’ve been pretty clueless the whole time! Their responses to Jesus’ teachings and ministry have been filled with “misunderstanding and fear.” [[3]](#footnote-3) It’s actually almost funny how bad they are at being disciples. Remember last week’s passage: Jesus had just finished denouncing the corruption of the Temple leadership for stealing from the most vulnerable, stooping so low as to take a widow’s last two coins from her (at the end of chapter 12). And when they go outside, the disciples say, “Yup, the Temple sure is great! Isn’t it beautiful?” (at the start of chapter 13). It’s like they didn’t even hear what Jesus was saying at all! And even here, just after making this big pronouncement that they would rather give their lives than abandon Jesus, they can’t do the one thing he asks of them: to stay awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, at his most desperate and fearful hour. “Could you not keep awake one hour?” Jesus will ask them, bitterly (v. 37).

 To be completely honest, I’ve had my Garden of Gethsemane moments this week – moments of worry and fear for the future, moments of wondering what this pandemic means for my family and friends, moments of praying that the worst-case scenarios won’t come to pass. Maybe you’ve had these moments, too, when this whole thing has seemed overwhelming. In those moments, I’ve wanted to just close my eyes and pretend this isn’t happening. Like the disciples, I’ve wanted to sleep through this crisis, to lay my head down and have it pass me by, to pretend it’s not urgent. But Jesus wakes the disciples up, over and over. This is not the time for sleep. “The hour has come,” he says. “Get up” (v. 41-42).

 This is not the time for sleep, and yet strangely for many of us, taking responsibility right now means staying home. This is the opposite of what we usually think about as taking responsibility and doing our part! We are used to going out and gathering with other people and doing things – that’s how we understand responsibility! Staying home doesn’t feel like we’re doing much – but that’s exactly what’s needed right now, to “flatten the curve” – to slow the spread of the virus, lowering the risk to those most vulnerable to the virus, so that our healthcare system is not overwhelmed with patients. Right now, following these health guidelines – including staying home as much as we’re able – is a form of loving our neighbours.

All these closures and cancellations can feel eerie to us, and we may, understandably, have our moments of feeling afraid. Even Jesus felt profoundly afraid in the Garden – Mark says he was “distressed and agitated,” and Jesus himself named his fear out loud: “I am deeply grieved, even to death” (v. 33-34). Fear itself is not avoidable in profoundly uncertain situations like the one we find ourselves in. But what matters is what we do with that fear. Let’s be clear – we are not staying home right now because we are afraid. We’re staying home as a form of solidarity with one another as a community, and to protect those most vulnerable to this illness.

 And we know that “social distancing” doesn’t mean doing nothing, right? We can still connect – we can call each other, or message each other. We can share words of encouragement and love. We can share accurate medical information and updates of health guidelines. If we’re healthy, we can offer to pick up groceries or prescriptions for one another. We can donate to Friendship Inn, which is in need of bag lunch items as they make their meals to-go during this time. Even in Italy, where the virus has led to a total lockdown, I have found it really moving to see the different ways people are reaching out to their neighbours, even without being able to physically get together. They open their windows and play instruments and sing, they put up encouraging messages in the windows. Through these acts of care, they reiterate that they are in this together, that even though things are difficult, we are not going through this alone.

 As I’ve navigated this week, I’ve found Sarah Bessey’s take on things comforting. She wrote a message on social media that reads, “It is interesting to me that the advice we are hearing: avoid crowds, stay connected, look after your neighbours, love the vulnerable with your choices, wash your hands, go outside, be in nature instead of crowds, etc. means we might just become better humans during this ordeal.” We can get through this, together.

As we continue our Lenten journey, reading through Mark’s account of the Gospel story, we’re left wondering: why does Mark depict the disciples as such bumbling fools? At first glance, this doesn’t seem very inspiring or even very positive. What are we supposed to do with this group of embarrassingly bad disciples, this group of failures? Well, if we take a closer look, these foolish disciples actually give us some hope. If they in all their fumbling human confusion and fear can be counted among Jesus’ closest followers, then all of us can likewise call ourselves disciples! They show us that discipleship isn’t ultimately about perfection or having it all figured out. We haven’t arrived, and that’s not what it’s about. Instead, it’s about being “on the way” – about continuing to journey together with Jesus, through Lent, through this pandemic, through whatever life may bring our way. We are on our way to being disciples – we are not required to be perfect, but we are called to accompany each other on this journey, knowing that the presence of God goes with us. We do not have to make this journey alone. That is good news!

 So, I close with the words of our Service of Shadows litany, which has taken on new meaning this week. May we continue “on the way,” living out our love for God and neighbour, even – especially – in these uncertain times. God is with us, empowering us and giving us strength and peace:

**O God, you make a way through the wilderness,**

**a highway through the desert,**

**“a way out of no way.”**

**As we journey through the season of Lent,**

**remind us that you go ahead of us**

**and, as Christ, God-with-us, call us to meet you**

**on the way.**

 **Remind us that though the shadows are long,**

**though we have not arrived**

**though we are not perfect,**

**it is enough to be on the way**

**following your way of justice and peace**

**as your disciples and friends.**

**Empower us with your Spirit**

**to continue**

**on the way. AMEN**

1. Lydia Neufeld Harder, *The Challenge Is in the Naming: A Theological Journey* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2018), 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Neufeld Harder, 116-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)