Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





by Pat Marrin

View Author Profile
patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“I have set my face like flint” (Isaiah 50:8).

Is 50:5-9a; Ps 116; Jas 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The famous scene at Caesarea Philippi is halfway through Mark’s Gospel. It is also the turning point in Jesus’ ministry. His ascent to apparent success in Galilee becomes the long descent to suffering and death as he leads his disciples south to Jerusalem.

The Apostles are filled with enthusiasm over their own prominence as Jesus’ lieutenants. The crowds surge around him to witness his miracles, exorcisms and eloquent teaching. Jesus does a quick opinion poll, then asks his inner circle who they think he is. Peter proclaims that he is the Christ, God’s anointed one, a title loaded with expectations about the triumph of Israel over its enemies and the restoration of the glory of David. Jesus praises Peter’s insight but then corrects his messianic model from glorious Savior to Suffering Servant.

They are at the crossroads, and Jesus reveals the paradox of suffering as God’s plan for redeeming the world. The Paschal Mystery -- dying to self to live for others, disarming sin by forgiveness, overcoming death by embracing it -- are ideas so shocking and counter-intuitive, even the church has struggled to preach radical

nonviolence as the only path to peace and reconciliation. The power of love seems only rhetorical compared to the reality of the just war theory and the doctrine of deterrence. Peter knew better and takes Jesus aside to instruct him, only to be called, “Satan” for thinking “not as God does, but as human beings do.”

Jesus discerned his identity as God’s Suffering Servant when he was confronted in the desert by Satan after his baptism. Jesus dismissed Satan and trusted God’s justice and mercy as he emerged to preach the reign of God. He went to his death believing that God would make his offering redemptive and far more powerful than any kind of earthly victory. We can hear echoes of Isaiah in his determination: “I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame” (50:8). He modeled for others coming after him — Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr and Oscar Romero, among many others —that laying down your life is how to defeat evil and to give love the final say over death. Sacrificial love, not power, is the engine of history that reveals human destiny as the Beloved Community instead of self-destruction.

Some have said that 9/11 was the turning point in American history. Achieving epochal dominance at the end of the Cold War and immense wealth and power, the United States then suffered a catastrophic blow to its people, the illusion of security and to the sacred symbols of its global preeminence. The 20th anniversary of those terrible events and the decisions made to redress them have stirred a sobering retrospection. Where do want to go from here? The wisdom of Jesus stands ready as Good News over so many other tried but tired solutions to world conflict and domestic divisions.

Today’s Word calls us to think as God thinks and to act as Jesus did to challenge conventional rhetoric about the need for more force and more violence to protect ourselves. The paradox of the cross is the path to truth and reconciliation. Jesus turned to the crowds and said, *Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.*

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