

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 2nd Sunday of Lent, February 25, 2018.

Our theme for today is “Be careful what you don’t ask for.”

We know from the Old Testament lesson (**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**) that Abraham is in his late 90s. We are not told how old Sarah is, but let’s assume that she too is up in years. As a couple, they believed that they had led a decent life, with no regrets, and now were ready for whatever awaited them on the other side of death.

Well, this was not how God saw their situation. Far from granting them a noble ending to life, God appointed a noble beginning. “I have made you, Abraham, the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.” And, as for Sarah, “I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of people shall come from her.”

I don’t know which of them – Abraham or Sarah – was more surprised. But, consistent with their obedient nature, they took a deep breath and went along for the ride that God announced. Be careful what you don’t ask for. God might well have something special in mind.

This is a good reminder that, whatever our age, whatever our experiences, whatever we think might happen, God might have a different plan. Our worship mate, John Newell, shared with me the other day a saying by Vince Scully, the longtime announcer for the Brooklyn and LA Dodgers. “If you want to see God smile, tell him what your plans are.”

In his Letter to the early Christians in Rome (**Romans 4:13-25**), St. Paul notes that “the promise that Abraham would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” Paul goes on: “Abraham did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead – how’s that for straight talk - or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith, being fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised.”

This level of faith on Abraham's part sets a very high bar. So high, in fact, that most of us, if not all of us, would see us not getting even close to the bar, much less clearing it. If Jesus was to ask us to "Take up our cross and follow him," we might well say, "Please don't ask me to do this."

Sticking with the theme of "Be careful what you don't ask for," we would not ask for a chance to take up our cross. It's too hard. It's too high. It's too dangerous. It's well beyond our capability."

Not the answer that Jesus wanted to hear from his disciples. He rebukes them: "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

And that's not the answer that we want to hear. We just want Jesus to understand our misgiving. We want him to realize that we can't do what he can do. Through his death and resurrection, he can save the world. But that's well above our pay grade.

But is it really? Is it really too hard for us to take up our cross and follow Jesus? People just like us have been doing this for centuries. Not perfectly, but obediently. Not without setback, but with determination. You and I wouldn't be here today if there had been a breakdown in cross-carrying at any point in the last 2,000 years.

Note in today's gospel (**Mark 8:31-38**) that Jesus doesn't say "Take up my cross." No, he says "take up your cross," which in nearly every case is something short of crucifixion. Though it must be noted that we are blessed to have people do heroic things on our behalf. Every day, there are civil servants who willingly face the possibility of losing their life while protecting us. For most of us, however, the crosses we bear are not above our pay grade. They might be challenging, but they are not impossible, if we really want to do this.

When Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus is telling Peter "Don't underestimate your ability to carry a cross that is tailored to you. That's the devil whispering caution and doubt in your ear, not me. You can sacrifice at a higher level than you're doing right now. The courage is in you. You just have to tap into it. Not ignore it. Not deny it. Give thanks for the courage that is within you, and

exercise it. That's all I'm asking. I'll do the heavy lifting. Not to worry. But I want you, I need you, to do whatever lifting is appropriate for you. And believe me, if you look for that courage, you'll find it."

Jesus didn't realize it, of course, but this admonition to Peter sets the table for our Season of Lent. This is the time to examine what crosses we might be bearing already and what additional sacrifices we might take on. Yes, Jesus set a high bar for himself and cleared it. Now, he wants us to set a high bar for ourselves. Not an unrealistic bar, not the same bar as Jesus, but one that we can go for, confident that the Risen Christ is right by our side on this tailored journey. Our Psalm today (**Psalm 22:22-30**) has this phrase: "But when they cry to him he hears them." In other words, whatever extra sacrifice we elect, God will be with us.

And what we also need to remember this holy season and every season is that even when we don't elect to carry a cross, God is with us. He would prefer that we elect to do so, but is well aware that we might not be ready. Remember that there were three years between the baptism of Jesus and the crucifixion. And there were probably moments during those three years when Jesus was tempted to call the whole thing off. What kept him going was a strong sense of self. He knew that he was born to serve, and to do so by offering his life on a cross.

You and I are born to serve as well. Not necessarily on a cross, but in some manner appropriate to our gifts and talents and circumstances. We have a niche, but sometimes it takes a long time to discover what that niche is. And sometimes the niche changes. All the more reason why we should not rule out anything. "Be careful what you don't ask for, because you just might get it anyway." We might not have a plan for ourselves, but God might have one for us, and with a smile.

Our final hymn today is *Abide with me*. Here's the last stanza:

*Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes. Well, there's a Season for holding the cross before us, and we're in the Second Sunday of that Season. And God is with us, helping us find our niche. Amen.

