

**Sermon: The Cost of Discipleship**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 17:1-7; Mark 8:31-38**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian and a Nazi resister who was hanged in the closing days of the Second World War, published a small book in 1937 called *The Cost of Discipleship*. If anyone knew the true cost, it was Bonhoeffer. He wrote, ‘When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.’

As we will see, discipleship is not for the squeamish.

Our reading from Genesis tells the story of God’s second covenant, now known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Depending on who you ask, there are six, or maybe eight, or even as many as 75 covenants in the Bible.

The writers of Genesis keep pretty good track of Abram’s age. It’s interesting but I don’t know if it’s helpful, except to say that long life was often a sign of God’s blessing. Here, when Abram is 99 years old, *Adonai* appeared to him and said, ‘I am *El Shaddai* [God Almighty]. Walk in my presence and be pure-hearted.’ Abram fell on his face, and God continued speaking with him: ‘**As for me**, this is my covenant with you: you will be the father of nations.’ Then God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants, as a permanent possession, as part of this everlasting covenant.

At this point, you may have noticed that the lectionary has snipped out, so to speak, a somewhat important passage, one that highlights what this covenant will cost.

In verse nine, ‘God said to Abraham, “**As for you**, you are to keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, generation after generation. Here is my covenant, which you are to keep, between me and you, along with your descendants after you: every male among you is to be circumcised”’ (David Stern translation).

If you *refused* to be circumcised, added God, ‘that person will be cut off from his people,’ because he has broken the covenant. You could be circumcised, or you could be cut off from your people; you choose. Without belaboring the point, that was the cost of discipleship for Abraham: he had to have skin in the game, literally.

The good news for Abraham is that God has already made him the ancestor of a multitude of nations, through his son Ishmael, whose mother was Hagar, back when Abram was only 86 years old. And Abram was already wealthy, but now God promised to make Abraham ‘exceedingly fruitful,’ which is kind of unexpected. And, kings will come from Abraham and ‘kings of people’ shall come from Sarah, also unexpected.

This is why we care: through Abraham came David and from David, Joseph, husband of Mary, mother of Jesus of Nazareth, called the Messiah.

Speaking of Jesus, in Mark, he creates a teaching moment for his disciples. When he said that the Son of Man, a term he often used when referring to himself, must suffer, be rejected and killed, and then rise again after three days, Peter took exception. We don’t know exactly what Peter said because his rebuke was meant to be private. But Jesus makes his own rebuke public to the rest of the disciples, and said, basically, ‘you’re on the wrong side of this one, Pete; take a step back.’

The context implies that Peter couldn’t connect Jesus the Messiah in verse 29 and Jesus the Son of Man in verse 31, with suffering and death.

Here is where things get real for the disciples and the crowd: Jesus said, ‘*If* any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up *their* cross and follow me.’ Now, they must have thought they were his followers already, didn’t they? And we think of ourselves as followers too. Jesus makes it entirely optional, just like becoming part of Abraham’s nation. Abraham and Ishmael were circumcised that very day, as were all the men in Abraham’s household. They didn’t hesitate.

Jesus seems to be saying, you’ve come this far; you’ve seen what I do; if you still want to do this, this is what it means to continue.

But what can any of us give in return for our lives? What will it profit us to gain the whole world and forfeit our life? God doesn’t need our cash. God wants our lives, and by giving them, we set our minds on divine things.

Bonhoeffer knew this too, which made resisting Hitler the only logical thing to do. For Bonhoeffer, the call to follow Jesus meant to share in the work of forgiving the sins of others, which is the suffering which a Christian must bear.

He wrote, ‘How is the disciple to know what kind of cross is meant for him?’ He answers his own question by saying, ‘He will find out as soon as he begins to follow his Lord and to share his life.’

Now, does this mean that some day we are all going to end up nailed to a tree? Probably not a literal tree, although a quick survey of social media indicates there are quite a few people out there who seem willing to resort to violence to achieve their own twisted ends. We can make a long list of names of all the people we would have a hard time forgiving, just covering the last twenty years or so. It’s hard work, and often controversial, and it takes a lot of faith to forgive. And a lot of prayer, and doubt.

We have plenty of opportunities to give our lives to acts of love, compassion, justice, and peace, day after day. We still strive to do at least one good deed a day, in the midst of an uncaring and often hostile world. Let’s not let that get away from us.

Do we need to get a new name before we establish a trusting relationship with God? What new purpose for us might God reveal along with our name? All Abraham had to do, aside from his circumcision, was to walk before God and be blameless. What that means is, Abraham and his descendants lived under the light burden of faithfulness, and in return they received God’s everlasting grace. In this season of Lent, we are invited to reflect on the nature of our own covenant with God.

Martin Luther described a ‘theology of the cross’ as contradicting everything we imagine God should be. When Jesus asked the disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am,’ Peter answered, ‘the Messiah,’ meaning some kind of warrior who might defeat Caesar and end Roman rule in Israel. The disciples just couldn’t accept Jesus for what he was: the one who would suffer and lay down his life for others. When we understand that much about him, then we can begin to understand ourselves and our response to that kind of Jesus, and then, if we choose to, deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow him.

Amen.