

## Sermon, August 30, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friend Nan Gangler and her hammered dulcimer for special music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases and deaths are peaking nationally, and rising again in Maryland; and many, if not most of our members are either in high-risk groups, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is [stmarksoakland.com](http://stmarksoakland.com) (no spaces or caps)

Now today's stupid joke.

A friend of mine was pulled over while driving last week. The policeman walked up to her car window and said, "Relax ma'am. You aren't in any trouble. This is Highway Safety Week, and since you were driving under the speed limit AND wearing your seatbelt AND not using your cell phone, I'm going to give you a \$50 gift card." My friend said, "Great!" The cop then asked her, "So, what are you going to do with the money?" And she said, "I don't know...maybe I'll get a driver's license."

*Music*

**The Lord be with you.**

Let us pray. O God, we thank you for your Son who chose the path of suffering for the sake of the world. Humble us by his example, point us

to the path of obedience, and give us strength to follow his commandments; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

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**A Reading from Jeremiah, the fifteenth chapter.**

O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation.

Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. Therefore thus says the LORD: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them.

And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD.

I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

**Here ends the reading.**

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## **The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the sixteenth chapter.**

From that time on, [after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah] Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

According to the late former mayor Marion Barry, Washington, D.C. actually has a LOW crime rate if you don't count all the killings. The late Houston Oilers football coach Bill Peterson once told his team,

“Men, I want you thinking of just one word all season long. One word and one word only: Super Bowl.

Britany Spears once told an interviewer that it’s great being a pop star. Why? She said because she gets to go overseas to lots of great places, like Canada. Former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger once confessed he believes gay marriage should be between a man and a woman.

It’s hard to resist speaking up for things you are passionate about, regardless how stupid you sometimes sound when you do. Take for example, PETER. Last week he made such an insightful observation that Jesus praised him; calling him the rock on which he would build his church. But now today Peter said something so dumb that Jesus called him a sk a n d a l o n or stumbling block.

In other words, today Peter was the kind of rock the Church would likely... trip over.

Between us, I’m not that’s really fair. Peter surely wasn’t the only person around who thought God couldn’t possibly allow the Messiah to suffer and be killed. In fact, I’m pretty sure that’s what just about EVERYBODY thought.

We Christians here on this side of Easter have had a much different picture of the Messiah painted for us than folks did back in Jesus’ day. That view had developed gradually over time, and wasn’t fully formed or widely accepted until the last centuries of the Old Testament period. The word Messiah comes from the Hebrew word Mashiach, which means “anointed one.” To anoint means to sprinkle, dab, or pour oil on a person’s head. But despite how that may sound, it’s nothing like a fraternity hazing or the old ice bucket fundraising challenge.

Anointing was a solemn religious rite usually reserved for the coronation of a king or the ordination of a priest. Anointing symbolically indicated God's implicit endorsement of the new official assuming his new office.

In the Hebrew Bible (which is our Old Testament), there are LOTS of Mashaichs, or "anointed ones." Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon to name a few.

Certain Temple priests, like Aaron and his sons, and every Kohen Gadohl or chief priest was counted among the anointed ones, or messiahs. For that matter, so was Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who liberated Israel from captivity in Babylon.

Early on, you didn't even need to be a person to be "anointed." A stone pillar was anointed in Genesis. The tabernacle in Leviticus.

In later Jewish thought A Messiah, or AN anointed one, gave way to the concept of THE Messiah—a future being who would be uniquely set apart. The word itself morphed into a title reserved for a much-anticipated conquering Jewish warrior hero.

On the order of David or Joshua or even Judas Maccabeus, he would be a divinely-sent leader who would defeat the armies of Israel's enemies and re-establish the Davidic monarchy at the end of time. **THIS** Messiah (capital M) would make his throne in Jerusalem, and rule over not just Israel, but all nations.

**THE** Messiah would usher in the "Messianic Age"—an age of world peace, social justice and prosperity. To this day the coming Messiah remains a fundamental belief of Judaism. In fact it's one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith of Maimonides, arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher and theologian of all time. (Who in his spare time was also

an astronomer, Torah scholar, ethicist and highly regarded physician. Slacker.)

Maimonides' messiah principle, which dates to the twelfth century, reads, "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he may tarry, I still await him every day." Today asking for the Messiah to come is part of the daily prayers of observant Jews.

During Havdalah, the ceremonial closing of the weekly Sabbath, a prayer is said that the Messiah might come during the week ahead. The traditional Passover Seder includes an open-door invitation and a glass of wine poured for Elijah, who is believed will reappear on earth to usher in the Messiah.

The Talmud, the collection of ancient rabbinic writings, indicates WHEN the Messiah actually comes may really be up to us.

The rabbis speculated the messiah would come as soon as every single Jew on earth properly observed two Sabbaths in a row. Elsewhere different rabbis thought the messiah would come only when an entire generation was either altogether righteous. Or altogether wicked.

From the Middle Ages through modern times some Jews, much like today's Fundamentalist Christian TV preachers, have interpreted current catastrophic events as portents of the messiah and impending end times.

The onset of the Crusades was sure to usher in the Messiah. But then it didn't. The expulsion of Jews from Spain? Nunca. The violent persecutions of Jews in 17th century Ukraine? Nyet. Surely the Nazi Holocaust! Nein. Thousands of Jews and Christians alike were certain the Messiah's appearance was imminent when Israel recaptured the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1967 Middle East war. Lo duruk. (That's Hebrew for "no way.")

Today millions still anxiously await the glorious arrival of the conquering hero anointed one. So I'm sure Peter wasn't the ONLY one shocked or even outraged to hear from Jesus that the Messiah's REAL job is, "To suffer and be killed." That probably shocked everyone. And I don't really get why Jesus would be so harsh with Peter—telling him in New Testament Greek  $\text{οπι σω μου}$ , Usually translated as "out of my way" or "get behind me."

But then again, I'm not so sure that's really what Jesus meant. Because it turns out this isn't the first time Jesus said  $\text{οπι σω μου}$  to Peter. Back in Matthew chapter four he said those words to Peter and his fishing buddies. But there  $\text{οπι σω μου}$  is usually translated as "follow me."

Yeah, I know—he still called him Satan today, but he certainly didn't mean that literally. In fact I wonder if today he was really saying something considerably different from what our translation implies.

Something like "look, you've got it all wrong. This isn't going to go down the way most folks think. I'm going to need you knuckleheads to stay with me—you know--get behind me— follow me--because things are going to get pretty ugly once we get to the city. Which of course, they did.

As to what purpose this story serves us today, well, I'm not sure. I DO know that when I say Messiah I mean something completely different from what my Jewish friends mean. They believe the messiah will be strictly a human being, albeit a very special one. My Massiach is my Lord. God incarnate. And while Jews eagerly anticipate their Messiah's coming, I'm looking forward to mine coming BACK; and I hope this time he does do all those things that they're expecting from him.

But I think there is even more to this story than that. I understand that Jesus' was preparing his disciples for the harsh reality of his pending suffering and death, but I wonder if maybe he was also preparing us for some harsh realities too. The reality that God doesn't always act in ways expected by folks like Peter. Or for that matter, folks like us.

We hear every Sunday about the Jesus of the biblical world who walked on the sea, calmed storms, healed the sick, and raised the dead. And not only when people asked, but sometimes even when they didn't. The Jesus who miraculously fed the hungry. Changed water to wine. And said, "Ask and it will be given to you." "Knock and the door will be opened."

But here in our world, it doesn't always seem to work that way, does it? I've asked for a lot of things I haven't received. Like divine intervention for parishioners, friends and family members who are sick or struggling, or living in loneliness and fear because of the life-threatening coronavirus. I've prayed for our church, trying to keep our ministries alive and well in the face of budgetary pressures stemming from the pandemic.

We have a niece and a couple of nephews with their own struggles. Some members of the Saint Mark's family are in the hospital or in nursing homes today. Some will make it out. Others may not. I have asked for help for a couple of out-of-work friends who have lost their jobs and are busy knocking on doors these days. But so far... no answer.

And I have to admit, I wonder where God is for all those scared immigrant children and refugees we've been praying for. For family members of our Black brothers and sisters wrongly killed for no good



reason. And for the thousands of Gulf Coast residents who last week didn't have much, and today have nothing.

Then there's that mess in Syria, where the enemy of our enemy is awkwardly somehow also our enemy.

So bring-on the miracles. The cures. The winning lottery numbers. Or maybe just give us this day our daily bread. Millions on the planet would be happy to receive even that. Like Peter, I too would prefer a conquering hero Messiah to one who suffers and dies. Because I think we have more than enough suffering and death as it is.

But I suppose for now we have to settle for a savior who reminds us how to appreciate God in the quiet times. When we can't see or touch or sense God's presence, or even the presence of our own loved ones. Jesus assures us God still stands with us. Or better yet,  $\sigma\pi\iota\ \sigma\omega\ \mu\omicron\upsilon$ -- gets behind us. Keeping tabs on what we need and when we need it. And helping out in ways we often don't perceive or understand.

So I am going to continue to knock. And ask. Remembering that often times we're probably standing at the wrong doors and asking for the wrong things. That's not to say I think everything will necessarily turn out for the best any time soon. It is still a chaotic and broken world out there, and not yet the messianic age where peace, social justice and prosperity prevail and we all really do love our neighbors as ourselves.

In the meantime life for many remains a struggle. And we continue to be knuckleheads. Who sometimes DO just need to get out of Jesus' way. Or better yet, to get behind him. And follow.

**Amen**

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