

21From that time on, 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. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23But 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."
24Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For 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?"
27"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. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

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In Nomine Jesu

I used to work for him at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. His predecessor hired me, and he fired me ... but that's another story. Worked out best for all of us.

Trinity is where I served for a number of years before coming home to Florida to serve a new bishop and our synod some more. He changed his tune a bit the last time I heard him at this annual service, but one of President Mark Ramseth's favorite ways to welcome all the students as the academic year began was to invite them and all of us to reflect on the 31st verse of the tenth chapter of the book of Hebrews:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Lot's of folks in Texas and Louisiana experienced that in these last days. They had to leave lives and homes, possessions and memories behind and the floor of their lives had fallen through below them. But what they fell into was the hands of God ... the living God ... and his rescuing angels.

And lot's of folk might think that those words are a really "odd" way for a "student-focused" seminary president to welcome students called to preparation for service in the church's ministry ... to lifelong church vocations. Yet President Ramseth kept returning to those words as a way of reminding all of us that the

call by God to Christian discipleship is not just a wonderful, blessed thing ... it's also ... **a sometimes fearful thing.**

What today's text does is take that rather "odd" idea and make it apply not just to those called to prepare for professional ministry and service in the church, but to each and every one of us called by our Baptism to "follow him." Our text asks us to remember not just the blessings of our Christian faith and life, but also the hard reality that it involves "bearing the cross" ... for each and every one of us. That's **a sometimes fearful thing!** ... the cost of discipleship.

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We're in a time of the church year in which almost all of the scripture readings we hear invite us to reflect on "oddness" as it relates to our Christian life. None, however, can seem so personally challenging ... maybe even painful ... as today's. I'd like you to join me in thinking about some of the most obviously "odd" things our text sets before us.

Let's start with this one. I think that you and I would agree that just about everybody we know in this world thinks that it's a really good idea to find ways to **avoid** suffering and dying, right? If we could do that, it'd be great! How "odd," then, that Jesus begins by pointing to suffering and death as the precise way he chooses to fulfill God's mission for the world through him. So "odd" that Jesus even calls Peter ... who he'd just a week named as his top student in the discipleship class ... "Satan." (How much lower can you get?!) That's what he got called for his "God forbid it" reaction to this news from Jesus. And he was just being concerned about Jesus' welfare. How "odd" this seems to the world – and maybe even to us!

And talk about "odd," how's this marketing disaster by the world's standards that Jesus falls into? He doesn't just say those things about suffering and death for himself. He says that any- and everybody who wants to be his disciple is in for the same kind of life. "Odd" life in the world's eyes. Life described as denying ourselves and shouldering our crosses, and following him. This to a world, then and now, that believes that the highest achievements are in fulfilling ourselves, protecting ourselves from pain and bad things happening, and following whatever path seems best to suit our fancy. How "odd" to invite us to be true disciples by suggesting just the opposite.

And as if those aren't enough, Jesus takes still a further, truly "odd," step by saying that death itself is going to be the price for being a disciple ... at least if you want to save your life. To do that we've got to "lose it" ... life ... if we're going to "find it." And all this while the world proclaims that "savers save" and "losers lose." Well, Jesus preaches the opposite – get the picture? "Savers lose, and losers save." How "odd" can you get?!

Yes, being called by God is **a sometimes fearful thing** – the very idea I started out with today.

Well, to test the truth of Jesus' words I'm going to ask you to do something very, very simple. I'm **not** going to ask you to think about anything complicated. I'm going to ask you to just stop for a moment with me ... stop and think ... stop and think about your life. Think about it and ask yourself whether your life as Jesus' follower has always been simply wonderful and blessed? Has it? All "peaches and cream"? Really?

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OK sometimes. But, c'mon now! Hasn't it also had those times of suffering and darkness, pain and hopelessness that found you maybe even right at death's door? And, if you've been at all honest, you'll have to say with me that it's been both. Not just blessed and wonderful. But painful and difficult. **A sometimes fearful thing.**

So if that's true, why do we hang in there? Why do we keep on following Jesus when to do so is so "odd" in the world's eyes. After all, aren't suffering and pain and death and all the bad things we seem so well acquainted with sure and certain signs that we've got it wrong? ... that he had it wrong? Aren't they evidence that what we're following is the message of some snake oil selling sleaze? That we're doing the wrong thing? The foolish thing? The ultimately "odd" thing?

Well, I'm going to make a guess that you and I have something else in common. It's that you've seen ... as I have ... the heart-warming piece of poetry called "footprints in the sand." I think you'll remember it. It has somebody talking with God in heaven after life's end, and that person has a complaint. It's that when that person's journey of life was replayed it showed two sets of footprints on the path in the mountaintop and joyous times, but only one in the hot and sandy path of the desert and dark valleys in life's most difficult moments. Remember that?

And remember how that person chided God for not being there when things got tough and showing up only on the good days? Remember? And remember what God said. That the reason there was only one set of steps in the path those days – the parched ones in the desert heat – was that God had picked up the person and carried that burdened one in God's own loving and healing and life-giving arms.

Well that's the truth in our text. And it's not just some sweetly sentimental poem that I'm talking about. It's the truth that when the suffering and the pain, the disappointment and despair in your life and mine are at the worst ... when it seems like for sure we've "lost it all" ... then is exactly when the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus come through in our lives.

There's no sin, no pain, no suffering, no darkness in your life or mine that hasn't already been borne to the cross of Calvary by Jesus himself. They were all carried there to death itself by our Savior. Borne by him because not one of us could bear for ourselves even the lightest of those burdens in the face of God's righteous judgment and demands.

But as Jesus died and rose again for us, so the blessing of that life is made clear in the Baptism that called each of us to follow him. The baptism that St. Paul reminds us buried each of us with our burdens of sin and suffering with Jesus, so that as he rose to newness of life, so we too might walk in that new life now and, we know, eternally.

A sometimes fearful thing? To be sure. Being disciples is surely that. But it's also a blessed and wonderful gift since it leaves us never alone in our life. We're called, one and all, to be with Jesus in the faithful community of the baptized. And when we're together we remind one another ... in the Body and the Blood of our Lord ... that his saving gifts and presence are here. Always. And today again as well as we share the bounty of God's table of grace. It will be a way of beginning to give thanks again for God's gift of life to you and me.

And let's keep this in mind as we celebrate Labor Day this weekend – our annual opportunity to honor the daily labor – so often at a price of personal pain and even suffering – that involves and sustains us all. Our own and that of others. How appropriate our text is in this context! Jesus' daily labor was to move toward Jerusalem for us ... his suffering and death for us ... but most importantly his resurrection from the dead for us. Our daily labor is to offer ourselves, denying our temptation to put ourselves and our wills first, taking up our cross, and following Jesus. Faithfully. Confidently. For life itself ... now and always.

And speaking of being in the hands of God being ... **a sometimes fearful thing,** remember the folk we still see and admire on our TV screens responding to Hurricane Harvey's devastation ... human chains linking stranded motorists to safety ... first responders taxed beyond belief for others ... crew hanging out of hovering helicopters pulling one after another to safety ... folk hauling their boats hundreds of miles to put them into strange waters to search ... our neighbors loading supplies into trucks ... and us going online to Lutheran Disaster Relief to add our funds to the cause ...

... in the Name of Jesus!

AMEN!