

what r u up 2?

“Take UP Your Cross and Follow”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, Feb. 25, 2024

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ website or by clicking this link and finding the date of the worship service in which it appears:

<https://www.christianworldmedia.com/wordstream/fumcgj/search>

Scripture Text: Mark 8:31-37 [NLT]

OPENING

(*Lines from the Choir’s anthem, “The Master Has Come”*)

*The Master has come, and He calls us to follow
The track of His footprints He leaves on the sand...*

Then, a few lines later expounding on that “track”:

*The Master has called us. The road may be dreary,
And dangers and sorrows are strewn on the track;
But God’s Holy Spirit shall comfort the weary.
We follow the Savior and cannot turn back.*

A much more poetic version of Jesus’ admonition in the Gospel passage we heard a few minutes ago: “*If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.*”

Compared to the anthem, Mark’s Gospel text paints a far less appealing picture of what it means to follow Christ!

TO THE SCRIPTURES

This narration is the pivot point of all 3 of the synoptic Gospels, and occurs just about in the middle of all three of them.

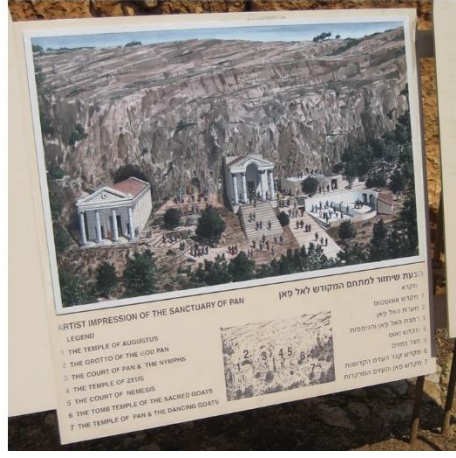
- Begins with Caesarea Philippi and Jesus’ question there about who people are saying He is.
- Moves on to Peter’s bold declaration (and, in Matthew, Jesus’ affirmation of Peter) and Jesus’ admonition not to spread that word,
- Jesus’ first prediction of His death and resurrection
- Peter’s rebuke of Jesus (Mark & Matthew only) and Jesus’ response that we heard in the Gospel reading today.
- But let’s go back to Caesarea Philippi (*Ppt pix*) and Jesus’ question there about who people are saying He is. Because the location is critical to the appreciation of Jesus’ discussion w/ His disciples.



The Remains of Polytheism at Caesarea Philippi



The Remains of Polytheism at Caesarea Philippi



Artist's Rendition of Pagan Temples and Grottos at Caesarea Philippi



The Pagan Temples & Grottos at Caesarea Philippi



The Pagan Temples & Grottos at Caesarea Philippi

It was against this backdrop of pagan polytheism that Jesus' discussion with His disciples took place. It was here that Peter proclaimed with great boldness that Jesus, not the pagan Roman gods, was the Messiah, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16).

SERMON THOUGHTS

“Take up your cross and follow me”...

When Jesus said that, it clearly made no sense to His hearers. Even Peter admonished Jesus not to talk the way He did about His suffering at the hands of the religious authorities and His death. You'll notice if you read the Gospel narrative carefully, that even Jesus' words about being raised from the dead three days later didn't soften the shock of His prediction of His suffering and death.

It would only be after His resurrection that this line would have had any meaning and strengthening power at all for Jesus' followers who, indeed, would experience many of the same mistreatments as “the Master” the Choir sang about earlier.

All this begs the question: What meaning does Jesus's admonition to "give up one's own way (i.e., "deny oneself"), take up one's cross, and follow Him" have for us, His followers today?

As I pondered that question, it occurred to me that very few of us face physical persecution the way the disciples did in the early years of the Church – or in the way some do in other parts of the world even today. But that isn't to say that we don't have our work cut out for us in our own time and place.

I think of one of Jesus' main preaching points, "the nearness of the kingdom of God" which we looked at last week, and I wonder about how much you and I stand for the values of the kingdom Jesus had in mind.

A brief survey of them might be as follows. They are discussed at far greater length by Jim Wallis in his 2019 book, *Christ in Crisis* (HarperOne / HarperCollinsPublishers).

1. Seeing strangers as neighbors, along the lines of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel
2. Taking seriously what it means for us and others to be created in the image and likeness of God and living accordingly
3. Insisting on truth and truth-telling over any form of speculation and unsubstantiated rumor, to say nothing of the rejection of outright falsehoods and lies.
4. Seeing power as something to be shared and employed for the good of all, not something to

hoard and wield over others for limited, selfish reasons

5. Recognizing that fear-mongering and intimidation have no place in the kingdom of which Jesus spoke
6. Understanding that government has its role in society, but that even government must be seen as being secondary to God's place in our lives. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's..."
7. Peacemaking is primary on God's agenda, followed by a desire to see righteousness, justice, mercy, and humility in human community.
8. Discipleship is not about privilege but about service and sacrifice, most powerfully depicted by what was an abhorrent symbol in Jesus' day: the Roman cross.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, only in light of the transformation of resurrection could such a symbol be seen as a pathway to faithfulness and godly living. It would be centuries before this wretched symbol would become the piece of gilded jewelry so many of us wear today.

And just because we struggle with "taking up our cross" and following Jesus and living by the kingdom values He promoted doesn't mean we're not one of His disciples. It means we're right in there with the rest of them – because they struggled, too!

If we didn't care, THAT would mean we weren't one of His disciples. But the fact that we do, even though we live our discipleship out imperfectly, means that we remain aware of our need for God's power and

grace to take up our cross daily and live as best we can as one of Jesus' followers.

*The Master has called us. The road may be dreary,
And dangers and sorrows are strewn on the track;
But God's Holy Spirit shall comfort the weary.
We follow the Savior and cannot turn back.*

♪ Hymn of Response: "Beneath the Cross of Jesus",
vv. 1 **THRU** 3, UMH #297