

Historian, Douglas Brinkley, writes: “Usually, one day in a century rises above the others as an accepted *turning point* or historic milestone. It becomes the climactic day, or 'the day,' of that century.” Quite honestly, I beg to differ with him as I think about all we have experienced in the past twenty years. 9/11 was a huge turning point for our country. This pandemic has been a history making event on multiple levels. January 6<sup>th</sup> of this year, another day that will be remembered in infamy, marks what is sure to be another turning point in our country. And, I have a feeling there will be more turning points on the horizon before this century comes to an end, points in time that will bring about major change and cause us to move in different directions. Turning points cause global change, change within an entire culture or, if the turning point is in one’s own life, it can cause us as individuals to change the direction **we** are going. I know this because I have experienced personal turning points in life and the fact that I am here today is the result of some of those turning points.

In today’s readings, we find people facing life-changing turning points. In our reading from Genesis, God establishes a covenant with Abram and tells him he will be the father of many nations, even though Abram is already ninety-nine years old and does not yet have children. Now, think

about it. What a surprise! As my friend says, “Old Abe was more ready for the nursing home than the maternity ward.” Yet, God makes it clear to Abram and Sarai that they **will** become parents. This is truly a turning point, and God marks this event by giving them new names. God says your names shall now be Abraham and Sarah; for I have made you the ancestors of a multitude of nations. This truly was a life-changing experience for them, and a turning point for the world because God’s faithful, everlasting covenant with Abraham’s descendents is established.

Today, we also come to a turning point in the gospel of Mark. In fact, it is **the central** turning point in Mark’s gospel. Just before today’s reading, Jesus has asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” In response, impetuous Peter gets all excited and professes that Jesus is indeed the long-promised Messiah. And now, Jesus **immediately** begins to tell his disciples what being the Messiah is all about, what his ministry will look like. He says, “It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religious scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive.” Well, Jesus’ words to the disciples are devastating. His words shatter and obliterate the disciples’ preconceived notions of **everything** they expected a coming Messiah would do. So, as reactive Peter hears this, he immediately backs

away and **rebukes** Jesus. Jesus' words simply destroy the glamor of following this long-expected Messiah. This is certainly **not** the kind of life Peter wants to undertake. While Jesus **seems** to be the Messiah, the Jewish people had **never** expected a leader who must suffer and die. That was simply ludicrous and irrational. Who in their right mind **chooses** to “proceed to an ordeal of suffering” as Jesus says he is doing? And, who in their right mind wants to even **follow** a leader who is on his way to die? This comes as a complete surprise. Nothing they have experienced has prepared them for Jesus to say he will suffer and die. And, what is even more appalling is that Jesus is telling them if **they** want to be **his** disciples, they must deny themselves and take up **their** crosses and follow him! No, this is NOT what they had hoped for.

Now, lest we judge Peter too quickly, we need to take a serious look at ourselves. Jesus' words are just as hard for **us** to hear. You see, most of us choose religion and come to believe important things deeply because we feel they are good for us. **We** like a religion that makes us feel good. We like a faith that fits our comfortable, recreational lifestyles. We like a faith that makes us feel happy, loved, at peace, and free from the challenges of life around us. In other words, we want a religion that will make us healthy, wealthy and wise. We want to follow a strong God who

“heals our illnesses, provides ample prosperity, guarantees security, and urges our sports teams on to victory.” (David Lose) Suffering does **not** fit into that plan. Quite honestly, if any one of us is offered a life of suffering versus a life **free from** suffering, you can be your bottom dollar, we will choose the one that is pain free! Yet, this is where we must get very honest about the Christian life. Christianity is **not** about living an easier life, living a life free from pain, or believing in a God we can turn to as our personal Santa Claus to help solve life’s problems and give us all we want. Quite frankly, following Jesus is often going to make our lives more complicated and challenging.

Jesus’ words to his disciples are hard and his way extreme. The disciples had thought the Messiah would offer security, protection, and make Israel great again! But, now Peter and the other disciples are learning that faith in Jesus is **not** about the elimination of risks, the preservation of life, or the ability to control. Instead, Jesus asks Peter and each one of us to risk it all, abandon our lives, and relinquish control to God. That is what **Jesus** is doing and he expects nothing less of those who would follow him.

The way of Christ is the way of self-denial, and it is a way that reminds us our life is not our own. Our very lives belong to God. The way

of Christ reminds us that **we** are **not** in control, God is. Our life is not about us. It is about God. There is great freedom in knowing and living this truth, freedom to be fully alive. Through living Christ's way of self-denial, our falling down becomes rising up, losing becomes a way of saving, and death leads to resurrection.

As long as we believe our life is about **us** we will continue to exercise power over others, try to save ourselves, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus. Jesus rarely exercised power over others or tried to control circumstances. He simply made different choices. And, for followers of Jesus, discipleship is about the choices **we** make.

Jesus chose to **give** in a world that takes, to **love** in a world that hates, to **heal** in a world that injures, to give **life** in a world that kills. He offered **mercy** when others sought vengeance, **forgiveness** when others condemned, and **compassion** when others were indifferent. He trusted God's **abundance** when others said there was not enough. With each choice he denied himself and showed God was present.

At some point, these kinds of choices will catch the attention of, and quite likely offend, those who live and profit by power, control, and looking out for number one. People who are offended will **not** deny themselves. They will react. Jesus said they would. He knew that he would be rejected

by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. It happens in every age for those who choose the path of self-denial. When it happened for Jesus, he made one last choice. He chose the cross and resurrection **over** survival.

Every day of our lives **we face choices**, and some of those choices **are** real turning points. In today's reading, Jesus says to each of us, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let **me** lead. You're not in the driver's seat, I am. Don't run from suffering, embrace it. If any of you want to follow me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is **the** way, **my** way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose **you**, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?" (*The Message*)

The point at which Jesus says this to his disciples is **the** turning point in Mark's telling of the Jesus story, and it is **the** turning point for each of us in our life of faith. The words Jesus speaks to us today present THE big defining choice for every Christian. "If any of you want to follow me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me...."