

One of the most interesting things I learned at seminary in Hebrew class was the meaning of the word דֶּרֶךְ which translates 'way, manner, road.' But this is not 'road' in the sense of saying, "take 35W north." It refers at a deeper level to following in the ways or path set forth by God. So then, after the death of Solomon, Israel split into a northern kingdom of Israel and a southern kingdom of Judah. Unfortunately, none of the northern kings were faithful rulers and were described like King Amon of whom it was said לֹא בָּרַךְ הַלֵּךְ הָאֱלֹהִים that is, he "did not walk in the way of the Lord."

When we meet Jesus and his disciples in this morning's Gospel lesson, they were on the way or road, traveling to Jerusalem. They avoided towns and the crowds that gathered there, for Jesus had things he needed to teach those who were with him. It is the second time he let them know what would happen at their destination. "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

This was not news that the disciples wanted to hear, and they demonstrated something that I have found very common for human beings. If we don't want to hear something, we just don't hear it. Consequently, it didn't make any sense to the twelve, and they were terrified to the point that they were afraid to ask their Rabbi what he really meant. They then buried their fear by engaging with each other on the journey in a rather pointless argument about which of them was the greatest.

At the end of the day, Jesus asked them what was the subject of their intense conversation. I see them hanging their heads and scuffing their sandals in the dust, not wanting to admit their preoccupation. But he knew what they have been thinking and told them that they must give up notions of lording it over others, and instead become the slave of any who need them.

For example, he said, taking a child in his arms, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The thing about children in that day is that they were probably loved by their families, but they had absolutely no worth in society. Until they were old enough to contribute work to their family's economy, they were

purely a burden. They had no rights, no influence; they were dependent and powerless. If you wanted to present a symbol of the least of these, a child was a good choice. To be a slave for such a person was unimaginable.

But that is Jesus' response to those who think they might be greater than anyone else. This teaching, like the word of what was coming in Jerusalem, would have required an enormous amount of faith to live into. And the disciples were not ready for that גרל, that way or road.

What do you do when it not possible to have faith in what is before you? Well, the opposite of faith is not doubt. It is fear. And in their fear, they longed to become great, so that they would be insulated against the winds and turmoil of all that threatens them. We see this all through Mark's gospel. The apostles are continually consumed by fear.

When they were caught in a boat, in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, they woke Jesus to tell him that the boat was in danger of sinking. He first calmed the storm and then said, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' The answer is, 'well, not enough.' Not enough faith to face the events that were building around them, and so they were afraid.

At another point, Jesus was approached by a man who wanted the recipe for eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments, and the man said 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Mark then says, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. While he wanted to be with Jesus, and he wanted eternal life, he was terrified of getting those things by the route of being penniless.

Do you begin to see how we all face fears that struggle against our faith in what Jesus offers us? I don't know what the frightening place is for you. Is it not having enough money to get through the days ahead; is it a fear for your health and the apparent possibility of death; is it loneliness when a marriage ends; is it the waning of your strength with age and the threat of becoming dependent on others? Anyone's life has enough risks along the way to challenge what we are able to believe in.

When my mother told the stories of her adolescence, she often described how important religious belief and practice was in her family –

the gatherings of midweek church services and potlucks, the memory of her mother working on the old treadle sewing machine, keeping the time of the machine by singing hymns. I believe that those things were dear memories for her.

But I also know that both my parents grew up during the Great Depression, and Mom's greatest sense of achievement was, "We never went on the county." That was her point of greatness which countered the fear of destitution at the crossing where faith could not get her over. I often wished that the family had had to 'go on the county', so she could have learned that this would not have meant a kind of death.

But for all of us, if it's not one threat it's another, and we measure out our faith in these confrontations. So I would suggest that we all need what the Rev. David Lose offers as the three most important prayers which pretty much sum up the Christian life:

The first comes when we hear the counter-culture teaching that the last shall be first: Lord, help us.

The second presents itself when we fall short of our ideals:
Lord have mercy.

And for the third we realize that even as we fall short, yet Jesus still died for us, still lives for us, still loves us more than anything: now the prayer is "Thanks be to God."

Lord, help us.

Lord have mercy.

Thanks be to God.

The original disciples wandered off the way continually, got lost in their fears, and failures to understand. But for all that, Jesus never failed to hold them to himself and bring them home. So for us as well, in all the places where our faith drowns in confrontation with the turmoils of life, and fear threatens us with failure, Jesus nonetheless holds us up and leads us on the road to the Kingdom. Thanks be to God.