

I'm sure that you, like me have experienced a situation where reality has not matched your expectations. We've all had them. We've all been disappointed. We've all scratched our heads wondering what went wrong.

We order some item off the internet. It shows up, it's not at all what we were expecting: it's too big, too small, doesn't fit, the color is way different than the picture in the catalog or on the webpage. So we send it back.

We watch a show with high expectations based on the review from your friend, only to discover that your friend has way different taste than you do, and the show that was supposed to be "awesome" is, in fact, "rubbish."

But let's imagine you go down the street to Magnolia's, sit down for a delicious meal, order your favorite Hot Beef Sandwich, smothered in gravy, and they bring you . . . a protein bar. . . !

Clearly, you wouldn't be entirely happy. You'd be a bit shocked, disappointed, maybe even mad. Maybe you'd have words with the server:

"Hey, listen, this isn't right. This isn't what I ordered.

This isn't what I want."

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In our gospel text this morning, Peter quite clearly perceived the situation was not meeting his expectations. And he let Jesus know.

What our text unfortunately omits this Sunday is all the verses preceding our text this morning, Peter had vindicated himself quite well,

When Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter, boldly and insightfully, said, "You are the Messiah,"

That is, "You are the Christ," "You are the anointed one."

And before that text, Mark says that Jesus' disciples were in Caesarea Phillipi, a town that provides a striking context for our texts. Caesarea Phillipi was named as such by the tetrarch Philip, who named it after Caesar, the divine ruler of the Roman Empire, with his own name attached to avoid confusion with other Caesarias.

Thus, the location was dripping with connection to worldly rulers, worldly rulers anointed to their positions a Ruler of the Empire, and Trarch, ruler of four client state regions of the Roman empire.

So when Peter claims Jesus as *anointed ruler*, he clearly thought, in keeping with the Messianic son of David's expectation, that Jesus was going to overthrow the Ceasareas and the Philipis and the whole Roman Empire.

So, it's no wonder that Peter is perplexed and puzzled when Jesus starts to explain what it actually MEANS to be the messiah,  
That the "Son of Man must  
undergo great suffering,  
and be rejected by the elders,  
the chief priests, and the scribes,  
and be killed,  
and after three days rise again"

So Peter decides to mansplain to Jesus the kind of Messiah Jesus is supposed to be. "Stop talking crazy, Jesus. You aren't going to die, you're gonna overthrow Rome and bring back the Davidic kingdom borders. You aren't going to be a loser, Jesus. You are going to be a winner!"

And Jesus says, ever so kindly and gently, "Get behind me, Satan!"

How do you hear the phrase of Jesus when he said, "Get behind me, Satan"?

One typical way of understanding it is that Jesus is using very strong language to denounce evil, to denounce Satan. Almost as if the devil possesses Peter,  
And Jesus is, in effect, casting out a demon, casting out Satan from Peter,  
Who is "possessed" by the devil,  
And who misunderstands the purpose and mission of Jesus.

That interpretation, however, takes away too much human responsibility. . . I don't know about you, but I sort of feel powerless in the face of a supernatural entity. What chance does a finite fallible human being have against an entity with supernatural powers? Doesn't seem like a fair fight.

But consider this: the word "satan" is a transliteration of the Hebrew word, "*satan*", or *satan*, spelled the same basic way. And the meaning of the word *satan/satan*, is simply "the accuser."

"Satan" only shows up in two places in the Old Testament, in Job and in Zechariah, where it can be translated as "the accuser" or "adversary." Same for the temptation of Jesus, which could be translated as "the accuser/adversary."

I like how biblical scholar Walter Wink reflects on the original function of "the Satan" in God's court as providing options for obedience. Those whom Satan tempted (e.g., Job and Jesus) were given the opportunity to remain faithful to God's word and promise or to concede to the world's way of doing things.<sup>1</sup>

So when Jesus calls Peter "Satan" in the gospel text today, he is not labeling Peter as the embodiment of ultimate evil—as the term is so often applied in contemporary

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<sup>1</sup>*Unmasking the Powers* (Fortress Press, 1986, pp. 9–40)

culture—but instead naming Peter’s action of “setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mark 8:33) as a temptation to choose the world’s path.<sup>2</sup>

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So if Peter is just of the wrong mind, not the embodiment of all evil, what does Jesus mean when he says “Get behind me”?

What is often taken as a banishment, or a rejection, or even an exorcism, can be understood simply as,

“Get in line behind me.”

“Fall in” as the military would say

Maybe, just maybe, Jesus isn’t rejecting Peter so much as he is inviting Peter. . .

“Follow me, Peter, you knucklehead.” My way is not at all the way you think it is.

“For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

At this point then, Jesus calls the crowd in with the disciples and gives a really profound and unconventional and profound TED talk.

Here is what following me looks like, Jesus says. 3 easy steps:

#1 Deny yourself.

#2 Pick up your cross

#3 Follow me.

Furthermore, if you want to save your life, you must lose it.

And losing it for my sake and the sake of the Gospel means that you will save it.

Oops . . . Those aren’t easy steps!

A study<sup>3</sup> published by the National Institutes of Health estimates that as many as one in four women and one in nine men are affected by domestic violence (which includes economic, physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse of children, adults, or elders). This applies across communities, regardless of social, religious, or economic context. For anyone who has experienced violence, particularly at the hands of someone they love or trust, today’s words from Jesus in Mark 8:34-35 can be particularly difficult.

Too often, abusers use these words to convince victims of their abuse to remain silent.<sup>4</sup>

Not to mention the church and perhaps well-meaning pastors use these words to convince victims of their abuse to remain silent.

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<sup>2</sup> Sundays and Seasons ELCA resource.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK499891/>

<sup>4</sup> Sundays and Seasons ELCA resource.

I think that, as my title indicates, we need to “deny ourselves” and “take up the cross” DISCERNINGLY by thinking carefully and critically about what those phrases “take up your cross” and “deny yourself” really mean—and what they *don’t* mean.

Suffering abuse silently is not emulating Jesus; it doesn’t bring healing or accountability to the abuser or anyone else, and it is not what he calls for in discipleship.

Jesus here doesn’t justify any old suffering.

The weak suffering at the hands of the strong is NOT the suffering Jesus is talking about.

THAT is INJUSTICE, and God ALWAYS stands on the side of JUSTICE.

**Proper suffering is the suffering of the strong bearing with the weak.**

(REPEAT)

. . . doing all they can to eliminate abusive unjust suffering.

And of course, this is hard. And requires careful discernment. But if ever these words of Jesus mattered, they matter today. . .

For example, White Christian Nationalism, like Peter, is all about a powerful Jesus, riding in triumphantly to overthrow the perceived threats to their ability to control the whole country. There is no taking up their cross to bear with the weak, the oppressed, and the outsider. No, white Christian nationalism WANTS to persecute and marginalize the weak, the oppressed, the outsider, for the sake of their own power grab.

The way of Jesus is losing one’s life for the sake of the weak those in need, not taking advantage of the weak to keep and gain more power.

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So go this week,

Discerningly seeking to understand what Jesus means here about “taking up your cross” and “losing your life.”

Bear with the weak, side with the suffering.

*“For what will it profit us to gain the whole world and forfeit our lives?”*

Amen.