

Goodmorning! Welcome to Morgan Park Presbyterian Church. My name is Pastor Ben. Please join me in discerning the Word of God in our community this morning. Let us pray. God of light and love, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Exodus 3:1-15

Matthew 16:21-28

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When I was a college student, I was part of a college student ministry through the local Methodist church on campus at Ball State University in Indiana. I found this ministry with my roommate, Jeremy, because we both wanted to play guitar and sing in a worship band. This way of worship was an important part of our spiritual grounding that we were fed by in this ministry called College Connection. After attending one worship service, we both blindly and confidently committed to leading the worship band and joining the student community. "They need us!" I thought.

Three years later, after being deeply shaped by the relationships that I found in this community and the ministry that we did together, I was shocked to learn that the funding for this college student ministry - that provided for our pastor - had been cut from the budget. My pastor, who had nurtured a spiritual life in me and encouraged me to be a leader, was moving on, and we were left with the mess of trying to merge with the "other" contemporary worship service at this church.

We had two pianists now, one from each service, so they decided to alternate. The college student pianist was studying jazz and classical performance. He was an award winning bass player. He created a musical culture in worship with his playing, much like the influence of Lance in our worship today.

The pianist that we inherited from the other worship service was a science professor who had played for the choir for years. He sharply plucked out the notes of each song with enthusiasm, as if to force you into compliance with his melody by sheer will power. It didn't matter if it were a happy song or a sad song, fast song or slow song, the plunky chords on the first and third beat were there behind me. He was anything but subtle. And this supremely annoyed me as I tried to maintain the spiritual grounding of our worship service in music that I found so powerful in my own spiritual journey. This enthusiastic pianist was a constant reminder to me that the college ministry that I had been a part of creating over the last three years was now vulnerable to dying.

God forbid it!

This is exactly what Peter says to Jesus when Jesus first explained his plan to return to Jerusalem to suffer at the hands of the chief priests and be killed for his ministry that the disciples had been there for to help create.

God forbid it!

In hearing Jesus describe his own death at the hands of those in power, Peter totally misses the last line of Jesus' plan. "He must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering, and be killed, **and on the third day be raised.**"

From the beginning of Jesus' return trip to Jerusalem, Jesus knew that his encounters with those enforcing the status quo would be deadly, but he also knew that his death would not be the end. Jesus knew that on the third day he would be raised from the dead, overcoming the powers of sin and death and transforming life for all creation.

Somehow, this last line appears meaningless and unimportant in the face of experiencing the vulnerability and trauma of a state sponsored death. Peter, having just been affirmed as the rock on which the church shall be built, shifts from centering his actions on his faith in Jesus as Savior to a desire to preserve and protect Jesus, and in doing so, preserve and protect himself as well. They have been ministering to their community together for a long time. They have created an identity of healing and hope together that Peter wants to preserve and continue forever. Peter wants to create an institution out of their ministry of healing and grace, and having Jesus, the Messiah, is at the center of this institution identity.

But in seeking to protect Jesus from his own plans, Peter is really just protecting himself and the identity that he has created through the work of their ministry together. How could Jesus want to throw away everything they had worked for? He was the Messiah who could liberate his people from the tyranny of the Roman Empire, but "Jesus makes clear he is living into and reinterpreting his identity as Messiah by suffering and dying with his people."

**Suffering with.** Peter clearly would rather continue running from the powers in Jerusalem that are threatened by Jesus in order to continue their ministry as he knows it - remaining isolated from and protected from the powers that oppress the people he is healing. Jesus responds to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus knows how hard it has been and will be to chose to suffer with his people instead of using his divine power to preserve himself and his ministry. Everyone from Peter to Pilot will try to persuade him to accept the brokenness and suffering of others in order to preserve his own life. But with his divine perspective, Jesus chooses to confront the brokenness and suffering of this earthly kingdom - to suffer with humanity in order to lead humanity **beyond** brokenness and into the Kingdom of God - into a reality of love and justice.

Pastor Jin Kim responds to this passage by saying, “If we are going to become followers of Jesus, we cannot become any less vulnerable with, toward and for others. Our concern is not first and foremost the purity of the church or the rightness of our doctrine, but our willingness to follow Jesus into the world and onto the cross. We do not control God or give Jesus the conditions to our discipleship; instead, we risk contamination and insecurity by releasing the need to protect our own lives and institutions.”

The institution that I had participated in creating - College Connection - was vulnerable to death as we merged worship services and lost our own outreach ministries. For me, the reality of death and the grief of loss was being expressed in my frustration with this joyful, plucky pianist in our new worship band. What if I were able to see **beyond** this death and instead seek a community that was the body of Christ?

Perhaps the Body of Christ would have listened to this plucky pianist describe the anguish and pain of the divorce he was going through. Perhaps the Body of Christ would have noticed the grief of the many people from this other contemporary worship service who were also losing some sense of identity by merging with us. In many ways, they were dealing with the same anxieties as I was.

By allowing my identity to be shaped by this college ministry, I was able to suffer with the diverse student community that worshiped with me. We were dealing with major identity issues: dealing with the trauma of family relationships after coming out as gay, dealing with depression and suicidal thoughts in a culture that tells you to be perfect, and dealing with the pressures of family and society to be successful at something when still trying to figure out who you are.

Our slightly older counterparts who were joining with us were feeling the economic burden of living in a rustbelt city - their jobs were disappearing, their income security was a major anxiety, they were trying to learn new skills for an uncertain future. They were dealing with the pressures of society to be successful at something while trying to figure out who they were. They were dealing with depression, isolation and brokenness.

We were the church for each other, and yet I was not ready to let go of the identity I had already lost when our college pastor was forced to leave. I was not ready to look beyond this identity that I had worked so hard to create. Have you ever experienced this? You experience the loss of some identity - some group, some ministry, some loved one, some practice that has been important to your formation - and instead of moving on or adapting to a new reality, you cling to whatever remnants remain of that thing that you lost. Others might have a different reaction, running away when things fall apart - ashamed at the perceived failure that snuck into their

world. Feeling defeated and alone. Isolating themselves from the judgment of others while also isolating themselves from the empathy and love of their community.

Perhaps this is what Moses felt in his many years living in the wilderness with his Midianite family. Moses had grown up isolated from his Hebrew identity and community. He grew up in the house of Pharaoh - the very man who had ordered his execution as an infant, the man who had pursued a policy of genocide against his people. Upon his first attempt to advocate for his estranged people, he was accused of murdering the Egyptian guard who he saw oppressing his enslaved people. Moses ran away - he ran away to preserve his own life and he ran away with the shame of failure in his attempt to suffer with and protect his people.

*Suffer with* and protect. If we return to Jesus for a moment, we can discover a different way of being with his people - with all of humanity. Jesus came to suffer with and liberate humanity from the depths of sin and brokenness. This whole concept of protection, however, is a human one. Furthered by Peter in our passage today - seeking to protect Jesus and their shared ministry from the pain of death. Jesus does not demonstrate this “power over” like a king - exemplified in protection, but instead personifies “power with,” “suffering with” his people to lead them into the beloved community - the kingdom of God.

God appears to Moses out of the knowledge of his people’s suffering - to “be with” his people, to deliver them out of Egypt. God does not try to protect the Hebrew people from the violence of Pharaoh, but instead comes down from heaven to liberate them from the power of Pharaoh all together - exposing the Israelites to a whole host of new dangers from the Egyptians and the wilderness that they would journey into.

God creates a way **with** Moses, **with** Aaron, **with** the Israelites. They seek freedom from their suffering together. When Moses presents his anxieties - his subconscious desire to avoid death by asking, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” God Responds by saying, “I will be with you.”

God does not respond to this question, “You are Moses, the one who actually grew up with the house of Pharaoh and might actually have a shot at talking to him about letting my people go!” No. God is the actor in this liberation, and God names Moses’ identity by saying, “I will be with you.” Moses is identified as “God with us,” just as Jesus identifies with the suffering people. The impossible task in front of Moses is not his to complete, but God’s. Moses has only to follow the calling that God has presented for him - this is no small or easy task. Moses must confront his past - confront the failures of his youth, the suffering of his people, the pain that he has avoided for years living in the wilderness. Moses must give up his life to follow God’s call.

How do we embody our God of “suffering with”? How do we listen for God’s call on our lives? Moses was only able to notice the burning bush, the voice of “God with him”, the holy ground, when he traveled “beyond the wilderness.” Beyond the borders of isolation that he created to protect himself from his pain and his failure.

Exodus 3 verse 1 says, “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness.” Beyond the wilderness is where Moses found the mountain of God. Beyond the wilderness is where Moses encountered the burning bush. Beyond the wilderness is where Moses led his family’s flock as he straddled the boundaries of his identity. Beyond the wilderness that Moses had put between himself and the suffering of his people. Beyond the wilderness that gave him the freedom to ignore his past, ignore his pain, ignore the cries of his people. Beyond the wilderness is where Moses journeyed. And beyond the wilderness is where Moses encountered God.

God does the work of liberation and suffering with us. God calls us into the identity of “God with us.” We can do nothing to deserve the love and presence of God. We have already been claimed, no matter what we do. The only action that God needs of us - in order to be partners in God’s liberating work in creation - is to go beyond the wilderness.

We too create our own wilderness to protect ourselves. We create a wilderness to protect ourselves from our own pain, from the judgment of others, from the violence that we have experienced from the world. We become prisoners of our own wilderness - isolated and alone - unable to seek healing, unable to claim our identity with God and community.

Let us journey beyond our own wilderness to look for God in the space between. Let us journey beyond our own wilderness to look for God in the voices of our loved ones, the faces in our community, the hands that we hold when we sing to God in worship. When we journey beyond our wilderness, we can look beyond death. We can see beyond what we might lose when we risk vulnerability. We can live into the hope of God’s kingdom. We can give up our desire to protect our lives and our institutions from any risk of death. We can seek to embody God’s vision to be with, to suffer with, to journey with God’s people.

Pastor Jin Kim says it this way, “Instead of binding Jesus for our own self-preservation, the church must faithfully follow and bear witness to him, “even at the risk of losing its life.” It is precisely in participating in this way of Christ’s body in the world that we find ourselves being resurrected to new life.”

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Let us pray. Holy God, you empower us with your presence. You inspire us with your spirit among us. You liberate us with co-creative power. We are grateful for the witness of Jesus, who came to be with us, to suffer with us, to defeat death for all humanity. Empower us to look beyond death, to journey beyond the wilderness that we have created around us to protect ourselves from the brokenness of this world. Heal our wounded souls, that we might have strength to join you in suffering with others. Without you, we suffer in vain, but together we carry each other into your beloved community. Help us to grow closer together this day, that we might carry each other with you.

Amen.