

Second Sunday of Lent, Year B
Feb. 25, 2018
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

As marketing strategies go,
this one could have used some work.
One wonders why ANYONE
would respond positively
To an offer like this.

“Men wanted for hazardous journey,” the ad began.
“Low wages.
Bitter cold.
Long hours of complete darkness.
Safe return doubtful.
Honor and recognition in event of success.”

Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton
Placed that ad in a London newspaper in 1914.
He was looking for adventurers
willing to join the crew of his ship,
The Endurance,
On a dangerous expedition
to cross the entire continent of Antarctica,
From sea to sea,
Via the South Pole.

Those of you who have seen the movie “*The Endurance*”
Know that Shackleton did NOT overstate
the hardships his crew would face.
Indeed, they got stuck in the polar ice
And the ship was crushed.
There followed a series of heroic exploits
As the men struggled bravely
to escape what seemed like sure death.
Incredibly not a single life was lost.

So in that respect,
Though they endured howling winds
and unimaginable cold
Without benefit of Gore-tex,
And survived for long periods
on nothing but seal blubber,
You could argue
that the crew of Shackleton's ill-fated Antarctic adventure
Still got a better deal
Than that which Christ was offering HIS followers.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus says,
"let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save their life will lose it...
And those who lose their life for my sake,
And for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

It seems like Shackleton and Jesus
used the same marketing ploy.
It's not exactly a sales pitch designed to lure us in
With false promises of security
or comfort or status.

No, just assurances of discomfort,
of suffering, of loss, and of death.
But that can be the cost of discipleship
When you follow a Messiah
like the one Peter and the disciples followed.
Like the one some – but not all – Christians
still follow today.

You know, there's a legendary story about Peter
And what happened to him
in the final days of his life.
This, too, has been made into a movie that you may have seen.
Peter had gone Rome,
and had built up the church there.
But by the time of Nero,
Peter was a tired old man.

Nero had begun persecuting Christians with a vengeance,
And many had died.
Legend says that
Peter's friends convinced him
That it would better for him to flee the city
Than to stay
and face an almost certain death.
Maybe Peter
had forgotten the words
that Jesus had spoken so many years before.
"Those who want to save their life will lose it..."

And according to legend,
as he's leaving the city
In order to save his life,
Peter sees Christ walking toward him...
Walking INTO the city,
carrying a cross.

Peter falls down at his Savior's feet,
And he says
"Quo vadis, domine?"
(Where are you going, Lord?)

And Jesus replies
"I'm going to Rome to again be crucified."

Peter is stunned.
But in that instant,
he realizes that the road to salvation
leads **toward** pain and suffering,
Not away from it.

And Peter responds,
"Lord, I will return and follow you."
He does joyfully return to the city,
Where he is arrested and crucified,
Just as Jesus had predicted
so many years before.

Those who would follow Jesus
must take up their cross,
though today our crosses
come in different shapes.
Still, we know a cross when we see it,
And we know we've got to pick it up.
That's the hard part.

But here's the reassuring part:
Once we do, the question then becomes
not "Where are YOU going, Lord?"
But "Where are WE going Lord?"
"Where are WE going?"
"You and me together."

You know that the answer may be a hard one to hear.
Your commitment to walk this road with Jesus
Almost certainly will take you to some desolate places.
Almost certainly will ask you to do things
that you find risky and challenging.
It's not my place to judge –
nor do any of us have that right –
but I bet there's a former school resource officer in Florida
who right now desperately, desperately wishes
he had chosen the risky path forward
rather than staying safe where he was.

You know, I had to chuckle
at our Old Testament reading from Genesis this morning.
We're listening in on a conversation
between God and Abraham and Sarah.
In this conversation, God is once again promising Abraham
That not only will Abraham become a father,
he will become the patriarch of a great nation.
And Sarah will be the mother of the nation.

This is the third time God has made this promise to Abraham.
Twenty four years have passed
since the first time Abraham has heard this promise.

He's now 99 years old and Sarah is 90.
 We can forgive them if they were thinking
 God has maybe promised more
 Than can realistically be expected.
 But there's that promise again, for the third time.

Only this time, the promise comes with a cost.
 For the first time God mentions to Abraham
 what God expects in return.
 For whatever reason,
 our lectionary chose to skip right over the verses that spell that out.
 You'll notice verses 8-14
 have not been included in this morning's reading.
 Anyone know what the missing verses say?
 Any idea what God tells Abraham
 he expects him and all his male descendants to do?

Here's what God said:
 "Every male among you shall be circumcised."
 God offers no rationale for this commandment,
 but it's non-negotiable.
 Those who fail to be circumcised will have broken the covenant.

Imagine Abraham's response to this request from God.
 "You want me to do WHAT???!!"
 Up to now, Abraham has been good about doing what God wanted,
 About uprooting himself and his wife, traveling to a new land.
 And if God wants to give him and Sarah new names,
 well, that's fine too.
 You know, call me Abram or call me Abraham,
 just don't call me late for supper!
 But now, faithfulness requires something more.
 Now, his covenant with God
 requires him to put some skin in the game, so to speak.

During Lent, we're invited to spend 40 days
 thinking about the nature of our own covenant with God.
 It's a time to contemplate what God is calling us to do,
 What crosses we may be asked to carry,
 what skin we may have to put in the game.

Opportunities are before us every day:
Times when we can give ourselves over
To acts of love, compassion, justice, peace.
Times when we can carry the cross.

There will be times we are tempted
To put down that cross
And let someone else carry it for awhile.

But maybe that's when we'll see Jesus
walking toward us,
Carrying our cross for us.
Bidding us to follow him.

And we'll ask
"Where are we going Lord?"

You know, ENDURANCE is more than just a ship that went to Antarctica.
It's a quality required of everyone who would follow Jesus.

Do justice.
Love mercy.
And walk humbly **with** our Lord.

Amen.