

Paul holds up Abraham as an exemplar of the faith. In many ways, he is. He leaves his home and his family (Genesis 12) and follows God to a new place. He bargains with God to save his nephew, Lot. He believes God, and God reckons it to him as righteousness. Abraham accepts God's promise of land, children, and blessing.

At the same time, Abraham wants God to fulfill that promise Abraham's way. He's old and childless, and at first, he is willing to accept a foreign – born servant in his household (that's Eliazar of Damascus) as his heir. God says “no, your heir will be your own son.” So Sarah gives him her handmaid, Hagar, and they have Ishmael. God finally says “stop trying to do it your way – I will give you a son!” That's today's reading, and for the background, you'll have to read Genesis 12-16 (or you could just take my word for it).

It's not all that different from Peter. Peter has just confessed Jesus as the Messiah. As we hear this morning, Jesus explains what kind of Messiah he will be – the kind that puts himself aside and suffers and dies for the people. Peter takes Jesus aside to correct him – after all, that's not what a Messiah does. Yes, the Messiah will work for the people, but by exalting himself, by overthrowing the Romans to set up God's kingdom.

Now it's Jesus' turn to correct Peter, and his words are truly shocking: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny

themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” We hear these words all the time, and we put crosses everywhere, so I think they lose their power for us. But imagine if Jesus said “let them deny themselves and step up to the gallows and follow me” or “let them deny themselves and sit down in a bon fire and follow me.” Now we get to impact of what Jesus said, and why his words were so shocking.

And that’s why we’re not very good at following Jesus. We want to put ourselves first. We want what we want, and we want to follow Jesus our way. We want our plan, not God’s – like Abraham. We want our Messiah, not Jesus – like Peter. And it manifests itself in all kinds of ways:

I continue to be shocked by who doesn’t wear masks. On my last few trips through the Meijer, despite the signs on the door and right inside the door, at least three people inside the Meijer weren’t wearing masks. It’s common courtesy, yes, and it’s protecting our neighbor. It’s not even really *that* arduous. Imagine if Meijer had actual, difficult standards. How hard is this, people?

At the same time, not everyone who doesn’t follow all the rules I think they should follow are bad people who aren’t putting others first. I do not know everyone’s circumstances. I do not know why everyone doesn’t do everything exactly the way I think they should. I need to set

myself aside, judge less, and follow Jesus as he calls me. I need to let others follow Jesus as he calls them.

Can we put ourselves aside and let other people follow Jesus in the way God is calling them to follow? Can we put ourselves aside and follow God the way God is calling us to follow?

Most of the time, sadly, the answer is “no.” We get in the way all the time. We get in other’s way. We get in our own way. We get in God’s way.

Still, God fulfills his promise to Abraham. He gives Abraham a new name, and makes him the father of a great multitude. He gives Abraham all that he has promised, and his family will become Israel and will struggle with God for hundreds of years. Still, as God promised, through Abraham “all the families of the earth” are blessed.

Still, Jesus is the Messiah we need. He is not the Messiah we think we need, not just a new law giver who tells set all new rules for us, and not at all a conquering hero to set up a new, bloody, earthly kingdom. Instead, Jesus is the suffering servant, who dies for us and takes away our sin. He dies in spite of the fact that we don’t want him. He takes away our sin even though we think we’re right and don’t have sin for him to take. He loves us and lives and dies for us, as he promised, even though he knew we turn would away from him, and we would betray him.

Because the suffering, rejection, and death are the not the end of Jesus' words. Jesus also says that he will rise again. Jesus' promise extends beyond death to life again, for him and for us. This Messiah keeps his word and saves us in spite of ourselves, just as he never gives up on Peter, even as Peter gets it wrong.

And Jesus tells us about what our lives can be like now if we will put ourselves aside and live for others. Jesus shows us the self-denial, the way of the cross, is the Christian life fully lived. Jesus demonstrates the gain, the profit, the return of the life that he gives – the freedom from fear that comes from giving up and living with Jesus. Not the stupid, death-denying, faithless freedom that takes unnecessary risks and sets our own “liberty” as the highest and only true good. But the true and faithful life that comes from knowing our freedom comes from God, and means that we need not fear the world, sin, and the devil.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” says Jesus. We are terrible at this. We want what we want in the way we want it when we want it – including Jesus. But Jesus is not what we want. He's what we need. He gives himself up for us. Praise be to God. He calls us to give ourselves up for others. Thanks be to God. Amen.