

Peter and Ida
The Second Sunday of Lent
Sunday, February 28, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

Jesus said, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Peter had a fierce and feisty independent streak. He struggled with how to be a child of God, how to be a disciple of Jesus, in a time of hardship and oppression for his people, and in the midst of fighting his own pride. He had just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. But what sort of Messiah? Peter probably fell into the prevailing view of the Messiah as a political and military liberator, not a suffering servant to be tortured and executed. One writer put it this way, 'Peter and the disciples signed on for a crown, not a cross.'

Some of Peter's motives made sense. He wanted a just society for himself and the Jewish people. He was hoping Jesus was a means toward that end. And he did not want to lose his new friend to death. After Jesus disclosed that he would undergo suffering, be rejected, and be killed, Peter took Jesus aside to let him know this could not be the reward for all they had given to him. But Jesus rebuked Peter in front of the disciples to let them know his mission was different than what Peter and they may have expected, and following him would be different as well.

On Friday, Reverend James Lawson gave us a powerful sermon comparing how little Jesus talked about our personal salvation in contrast to how much emphasis he placed on simply following him, following him wherever he leads.

Like Peter, we yearn for salvation.
We yearn for deliverance from our problems.
We yearn for certainty.
We yearn for calm.
We yearn for peace.

One writer observes: 'Too often we expect Jesus will give us peace by freeing us from chaos, when, in fact, Jesus wants us to take his peace into the chaos and become his servants.'

Peter continued to struggle with what it means to be a follower, as we all do. Sometimes Peter's temper, his doubts, his human frailty got the better of him, as they did when he drew his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus, slave to the high priest, or as they did when he denied knowing Jesus three times, just before the crucifixion.

But Peter also found ways to balance his fierceness, feistiness, and passion with humility and resilience.

He learned to accept rebuke.
He learned to have the courage to say he was wrong.
He learned to weep.
He learned to follow.

Today is the final day of Black History Month. One of the stories recently brought to life in the new book, *Passionate for Justice* is the story of Memphis's own Ida B. Wells. Like Peter, she had a fierce and feisty independent streak.

When her mother and father died in the Yellow Fever pandemic of 1878, at age 16, she stepped forward to rear her 5 siblings and provide for their care. 71 years before Rosa Parks, Ida Wells was thrown off a train after she paid for a ticket to sit in the ladies' car. She won a settlement against the railroad, only to have it overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court.

In her quiet moments, she wondered about the meaning of all the trials she faced. She wrote in her diary a message we could all share this Lent, 'Father, forgive me, forgive me, Humble the pride and make me Thy child.'

Ida Wells discovered that her way to take up her cross and follow Jesus was to be the herald of the story. She had a gift for reporting and writing, and that's what she did. She shared the truth with the world about the death of her goddaughter's father, Tom Moss, and his companions. Ida was rewarded by having her newspaper office burned and her life threatened. She moved to Chicago, but continued to tell the hard stories.

Years later, a falsely accused prisoner asked her to come back to the South to visit him and his 11 innocent companions in Helena, Arkansas, and she did. Ida became their champion and she led the effort to free all 12 of them. One of the 12 came to her home in Chicago to thank her not long before she died.

What does it mean to take up our cross and follow Jesus? Peter, Ida, and we learn that to follow Jesus is to walk alongside suffering, including our own. Our call is to bear witness to the suffering, and when we see that evil is the root cause of some of the suffering and death around us, we shine a light on it and we root it out.

Peter and Ida learned that when they let go of their own pride and agendas, and poured themselves into following Jesus, it was then that they discovered their authentic selves, their truest calling.

They discovered what we continue to discover each step, even our backward steps, when we follow Jesus. They discovered that the way of the cross is none other than the way of life. *Amen.*