

## **Into the Landscape: The Masses**

*A sermon preached on Mark 8:31-38 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on February 25, 2018*

One sunny afternoon in Maryville, Tennessee, someone waltzed into the sanctuary of the New Providence Presbyterian Church and – in broad daylight, mind you – stole the cross right off the communion table. In their distress, the Presbyterian pastor called over to the Episcopal priest at the neighboring church to see if the congregation could borrow their chapel cross until they could get a new one. “Sure, I’m glad to share,” said the Episcopal priest named Martha, “but the only caveat is that we need the cross back each Thursday by 11:45 a.m. for our noon communion service.” The Presbyterian pastor agreed wholeheartedly and thanked Martha for her generosity.

Well here’s how Martha describes what happens next: “Presbyterians—they’re organized, prompt, often guilt ridden—so we figured we were safe. But a couple of weeks into the deal, 11:45 a.m. on a Thursday rolls around—no cross. We call the Presbyterians and whoever answers the phone never even heard of our cross. I hear Judy, our parish administrator, saying, well, “It’s pretty big, gold, what can I say it’s a cross.” About that time the other line rings so I pick it up and it’s the pastor of New Providence who’s cruising around in her car and nonchalantly asks if I want some lunch. I hiss back, “I don’t want lunch. I want our cross back.” Dead silence. Then she audibly gulps. It just kills Presbyterians to goof up. I hear a strangled voice, “Okay, I’m

U-turning on Broadway.” It got here. And they’ve been on their toes ever since.<sup>1</sup>

This story is funny of course, but it highlights the real truth that the cross matters, right? We’re like countless other churches who have one right down here each week, we sing hymns about the cross, some of us even wear a cross. We do so not because it’s just a nice table decoration — it’s not! — but rather because it reminds us of the central image of our faith and the redemptive work that Jesus did upon it.

We meet Jesus today talking about the cross back in the Gospel of Mark, where he and his disciples have been traveling around — healing, feeding, proclaiming the good news of the coming kingdom. Just before our passage for today begins, Jesus asks the disciples: “who do you say that I am,” to which Peter responds, “you are the Messiah,” and it changes everything. Jesus began to teach about the suffering he was to undergo, foretelling what would be waiting for him at the end of his life. And after Peter struggled to hear him, the text says: “Jesus called the crowd with his disciples” — indicating that he was widening the circle to which he would teach — and began to lay truth after truth upon the masses: “if any want to become my followers, 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.” Not exactly church humor, am I right?

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<sup>1</sup> Read as told by Joanna Adams at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Illinois in her sermon, “The Choice of a Lifetime.” It can be found here: <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2003/091403.html>

I must say, I haven't been able to read this text over the past couple of days without thinking about Scot Peterson, or perhaps better known to us as the school resource officer at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. In the past 10 days since the horrific mass shooting there, authorities have been investigating the things done and left undone that created the climate for such a tragedy to occur. Among other findings, their work uncovered video showing that Mr. Peterson, an armed and trained officer who had served at the school for nearly 10 years, clearly knew an active shooter had entered the school but, for reasons still unknown, failed to respond as he'd been trained, failed to respond as one would expect someone in his role to, failed to respond as the gravity of such a moment would demand.<sup>2</sup>

We don't know what happened, and it could be so easy to look at Mr. Peterson and pummel him with blame and shame, thinking about what could have been prevented if he had responded and not failed. But psychologists remind us that within the classic human responses to a threat – fight or flight – sometimes there's a third response – to freeze. In these moments, senses and time and voices become distorted. Instead of running into the masses or away from them, the adrenaline coursing through one's body simply causes it to stop.<sup>3</sup>

I don't know if Scot Peterson froze that fateful day, if he was terrified or simply numb. But I would imagine that not a moment will soon pass that Mr.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/02/22/armed-sheriffs-deputy-stayed-outside-florida-school-while-mass-killing-took-place/?utm\\_term=.98990e1395ad](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/02/22/armed-sheriffs-deputy-stayed-outside-florida-school-while-mass-killing-took-place/?utm_term=.98990e1395ad)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2018/02/23/why-didnt-the-officer-rush-into-floridas-parkland-school-mass-shooting/?utm\\_term=.1ea79eb423ff](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2018/02/23/why-didnt-the-officer-rush-into-floridas-parkland-school-mass-shooting/?utm_term=.1ea79eb423ff)

Peterson won't think about that decision and his failure to respond. I imagine that the self-blame will be suffocating, and that the guilt of living could easily chip away at his life. I don't know if Scot Peterson calls himself a Christian, but I would guess he'd resonate with these words of Jesus: "for those who want to save their life will lose it."

Putting one's life in front of another's is as extreme as it gets, no doubt about that, and the vast majority of us aren't asked on a regular basis to willingly do that as explicitly as Mr. Peterson was and all those who do — police officers, fire-fighters, EMS personnel, and military servicemen and women in particular. But as followers of the crucified Christ, we **are** asked to "lose our lives for his sake and for the sake of the gospel." We are compelled to suffer with our Suffering Savior. We are asked to respond purposefully and intentionally — not to fight or flee or freeze. Jesus is clear — "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

And yet, as much as we might be ashamed to admit it, you and I know that we all have a bit of Scot Peterson in us, don't we? We think to ourselves, what am I supposed to do about the climate that warms with each passing year, or the families I see ripped apart because of aggressive deportation? What am I supposed to do with the news that one in every four children in Forsyth County are food insecure,<sup>4</sup> or that over 40% of Winston-Salem residents who work full-time don't make enough to meet their families day to day needs?<sup>5</sup> What am I supposed to do about racism in the streets, or sexism

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<sup>4</sup> Stats from <http://forsythbackpackprogram.org/the-problem/>

<sup>5</sup> Stats from <http://www.povertythoughtforce.com/final-report/>

in the board room? What am I supposed to do about the civil war in Syria, or the persistent hurricane relief in Puerto Rico, or the nuclear threat in North Korea? What am I supposed to do about my mother whose health is in a free-fall, or my child who is struggling with his schoolwork, or my coworker who is driving me crazy, or my neighbor who can't seem to shake her addiction? When all the things of this world begin to pile up on top of our lives that are already over-scheduled, overworked, and under-valued, whether we mean to or not, we can easily begin to mentally check out. Who has time or money or the capacity to figure these things out, to respond, to do something to fix them, we wonder. And almost without even realizing it, our spiritual and emotional posture in the world freezes. We throw up our hands, overwhelmed and resigned. *"It is what it is."*

Into such a moment, might we look for wisdom in the actual words of Wisdom, personified in the Book of Proverbs, who stood in the busiest intersections, the streets and squares and corners filled with people to cry out her truth and let it be heard. There, Wisdom warned that *complacency* is what had the power to destroy the people.<sup>6</sup> Complacency – that feeling of gladness that comes from being secure, but unaware at the danger that lurks just out of view. Complacency doesn't just mean a blind acceptance of the world around us that simply is what it is, but it also means a complacency in our own lives, an unwillingness to carefully examine the patterns and rhythms and behaviors that we adopt within the world around us. Into the individual and communal complacency that afflicts us, Jesus's invitation to the masses is clear.

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<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 1:20-23, 32-33

I've told you before the image that Fred Craddock loved to share about living the Christian life, following Christ in a life of discipleship. He'd say: "We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table — 'Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that [Jesus] sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting instead of doing what we want to do. Giving a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home instead of hanging out with our friends. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul."<sup>7</sup>

Denying yourself and taking up your cross may not be as big as laying down a \$1000 bill. It may not be as dramatic as saving someone else's life. It may not be as straightforward as passing up that dessert during Lent. *But it may be just the habit or practice to move you beyond fighting, fleeing, or freezing... into a life of following.*

Denying yourself may mean loosening your grip on that you perceive to be right, so that you can take up your cross of seeking out real, honest relationship with someone in your life who you perceive to be wrong — and working tirelessly to find common places of agreement upon which to share.

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<sup>7</sup> Classic story of the late great Fred Craddock. I can't find the original source of the story, but it's been quoted by all sorts of pastors. I learned of it from a friend, and found it quoted precisely on the blog of another pastor friend here: <http://hermeneuticsinhighheels.blogspot.com/2013/12/25-cents-at-time.html>

Denying yourself may mean laying down your need to fix people's problems, so that you can take up your cross of simply bearing witness to their suffering.

Denying yourself may mean letting go of the way your loneliness causes you to hole up in your house, or run for the quickest fix, or surround yourself with people and things and noise so that you don't have to hear the whistle of silence, so that you can take up your cross of solitude in order that you might be still and know that God is God.

Denying yourself may mean shifting your drive for personal productivity and accolades and accomplishment, so that you can take up your cross and channel that energy into a broken system or a hurting people.

Denying yourself may mean checking yourself when you feel afraid, how fear makes you withdraw and distance and look upon others as threats to manage, so that you can take up your cross of reaching across a boundary of race or class or gender or orientation or religious tradition or political party and putting a face and a story and a beloved child of God to your fear.

Denying yourself may mean winnowing your hunger for all the possibilities and pleasures of this world, saying no to the umpteenth opportunity that comes your way, so that you can take up your cross of doing less with more intention, limiting yourself with beautiful constraints.

Denying yourself may mean abandoning your tendency to be a pushover, to resist conflict because it only upsets you, so that you can take up your cross of speaking your truth.

Folks, denying ourselves and taking up our crosses — whatever that may look like for you — will certainly put us in direct conflict with the masses

who grow increasingly expectant with each passing day for their lives to be ones filled with convenience, happiness, ease, efficiency, tranquility. Denying ourselves and taking up our crosses will lead us into a landscape at odds with the ones in which we live and move and have our being each day. Denying ourselves and taking up our crosses must be a daily, moment by moment set of decisions that shape us and form us into no less than followers of Christ. But first, we must train our eyes directly on the cross of Christ, seeing clearly the God unafraid to suffer and die for our sake.

I've gotten into this habit of wearing this rough-hewn wooden cross during Lent, not because it's the hot new accessory for spring or because my children have broken all my other necklaces. (Some, but not yet all!) I do so because it reminds me daily, moment by moment, of what it means to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus. It reorients me when I want to offer quick and sharp words to the young woman ringing me up at Panera, when she says they're out of cream cheese. It challenges me when I am frustrated with my spouse or weary with a friend. It reminds me when I'm preparing my tax documents, or when I'm paying the bills, or when I'm buying our groceries that "what will it profit me to gain the whole world and forfeit my life?" Would that I take up such a cross every day, and not just these forty!

Poet William Blake once said this: "And we are put on earth a little space, That we may learn to bear the beams of love."<sup>8</sup>

Brothers and sisters, may we deny ourselves so that we can take up our crosses to bear those beams of Love. For it is indeed a matter of life or death!

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43671/the-little-black-boy>