February 25, Lent 2B (Mark 8:31–38)

What a roller coaster for the disciples: They are following the Messiah! And doing so will cost them everything.

by Elizabeth Felicetti in the February 2024 issue

I have late-stage recurrent cancer and do not react well to people telling me to focus on the positive, which happens more often than many without cancer may realize. People want to distance themselves from those of us who live with disease, and dispensing advice seems to be one way. I doubt that I would react any better if someone told me to consider cancer a cross I need to take up so that I may better deny myself and follow Jesus. I relate to the resistance the disciples must feel when Jesus says this to them in this week's gospel reading.

The passage comes directly after Jesus asks his disciples who people are saying he is. They respond John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet. Then Jesus asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah.

That must feel like a winning moment for the disciples. They have been following Jesus and witnessing miracles, from healing to feeding thousands of people with what appear to be insufficient resources. They have selected their leader wisely, and now he has admitted that yes, he is the one, though they aren't supposed to tell anyone.

Right after this revelation, Jesus launches in with what will happen next: suffering, rejection, execution. All of this is so unexpected, especially after hearing him confess to being the Messiah, that the disciples probably can't absorb what he says about rising again after three days. Peter takes him aside to let him know that this isn't the way a winner should speak. Peter, after all, is the one who has just offered the right answer by declaring Jesus to be the Christ.

Instead of backtracking, Jesus rebukes Peter in the harshest way, calling him Satan, recalling the story of Job that Peter and the rest of the disciples would have known. Jesus will not be tempted to turn away, and after scolding Peter he doubles down on his message about denying oneself to follow him. He specifically mentions taking up a cross, evoking crucifixion, an ignoble way to die. What a roller coaster for the disciples, to first hear that they have indeed chosen to follow the Messiah only to learn that doing so will cost them everything.

I used to struggle more with this message than I do now, as someone who has had two cancers plus one recurrence. My cancer is no longer considered curable. I recognize that Jesus is not literally telling his disciples to seek suffering but rather encouraging them to embrace what is already happening. These followers are not wearing fancy robes and hats while presiding over worship communities and collecting generous salaries and benefits. Instead, they have already lost their lives to follow Jesus, literally dropping everything to do so, leaving their fishing nets and their families. Jesus is not inviting the disciples to overlook their suffering and their losses. He is not telling them to focus on the positive. They have already lost the lives they were living when they answered his call, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

In Mark's Gospel I am especially haunted by the image of Zebedee, left in the boat with hired men while his sons follow Jesus. Surely when they hear Jesus say these things, James and John remember leaving their father like that.

During the season of Lent, we are called to repentance, to purify ourselves. In the words of Ash Wednesday, we remember that we are returning to dust. Memento mori: remember your death. Jesus in this passage embodies this practice. Yes, he is the miracle-making Messiah, but he is already metaphorically taking up his cross, heading soon for Jerusalem. German theologian Martin Kähler famously called the Gospel of Mark “a passion narrative with an extended introduction,” and due to the amount of time Mark devotes to the Passion, this label is deserved, making it ideal for a season when we are called to ruminate on our mortality.

Having Jesus’ words quoted at me as a way for people to make themselves feel better about my cancer troubles me, but hearing and reading the words directly from him through scripture feels like an invitation to keep going despite the weight of the disease and accompanying treatments, trudging along after Jesus to the best of my ability toward those holy angels. When I read about such angels in the passage, I don’t picture winged figurines in peaceful poses but rather the terrifying creatures in the Bible who constantly tell those to whom they appear, “Don’t be afraid.” I hope that trying to follow Jesus during Lent, focusing on my mortality in a way I never could before my diagnoses, will enable me to tremble a little less in front of them.