

Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Psalm 22, Mark 8:31-38
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Maybe you read the article in the Times Dispatch a week or so ago about a doctor in Chesterfield County who was driving home about 5:00 p.m. and happened upon a car that had slid off the road into a partially frozen pond. He stopped his car to discover a woman trapped inside. He quickly took off his shirt and shoes and waded into the icy water. Initially he couldn't get into the car until it began to slide further in. Then he forced the front door open only to find that the woman had climbed into the back seat to take advantage of the only remaining air pocket. Unable to get her out, he took a rock from the bank and tried unsuccessfully to smash the back window.

As the car slipped further under the water, the man was now shoulder deep in the pond. A policeman, who had by now responded to a 911 call, handed the doctor his baton, and he was finally able to break the window and get the woman out. By this time, he was exhausted and hypothermic. The doctor later said that if the policeman hadn't thrown him a safety line and pulled them in, he might not have made it to shore with the woman he rescued.

The whole time I was reading about this dramatic and bone-chilling rescue, I kept thinking, "Could I have done that?" and more importantly, "Would I have done that?"

Today in our gospel, Jesus stuns his disciples by telling them that he "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." This unimaginable announcement follows directly on the heels of Peter's confession of Jesus as the messiah after Jesus asked the twelve, "Who do you say I am?"

The Jewish messiah was thought to be the one to lead a movement to overthrow the Roman occupiers of Israel. If Peter and the other eleven disciples believed this, the news that Jesus would soon be killed was preposterous.

Peter, like any of us, would of course have wanted to protect one, whom he had grown to love, from any danger. Jesus' unexpected pronouncement didn't jibe with the hopes and dreams he had signed up for when he said Yes to Jesus' call to follow him.

From everything we read about Peter's outbursts in other episodes in the gospels, we are not surprised that he speaks out, vehemently opposing Jesus' crazy death wish. We're told Peter rebukes Jesus.

Jesus' strong counter reprimand, "Get behind me, Satan!" is shocking. If Jesus thought that Peter was literally Satan, I am pretty sure Peter would have been told to pack his bags and leave the band of twelve. Jesus hears the tempter's voice in Peter's appeal for Jesus to play it safe. Peter isn't evil; he just doesn't understand what Jesus is up to. And how could he? All these years later, we can hardly understand how one wins by losing.

Peter's mistake gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves when and if we have been an unknowing voice for the tempter or the evil one? When might we have discouraged our children or other loved ones from choosing a path we didn't think would be profitable or entirely safe even though their ambitions and intentions were noble?

I think about the young woman, Kayla Mueller, who recently died after being held captive by ISIS. She was only 26 but had already spent years serving others, whether they were homeless women, HIV patients or war victims in Syria. She is quoted as having said, "For as long as I live, I will not let this suffering be normal." After her death her parents said that Kayla had told them she found the eyes of God in the suffering eyes of others.

I can't help but wonder how many times her parents may have tried to protect her and dissuade her from her perilous desires to help those suffering in dangerous places.

Kayla is an example of a perfect disciple then when Jesus tells his followers in today's gospel to deny themselves and take up their cross, and further, to save their lives by losing them for Jesus' sake and the gospel.

Maybe I am being the voice of the tempter when I say that we are not all called to go to dangerous places to serve the suffering and most vulnerable as Kayla did. There are plenty of suffering and needy people everywhere and not the least in our own community.

The writer William Faulkner once said, "Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world would do this, it would change the earth."

I hope I would jump into freezing water to save a person trapped in a sinking car. I hope I would not think twice about saving my life if another's was in peril right in front of me. I'll never know until I'm faced with a similar situation. But I can take the minimal risk daily, as Faulkner said, by "raising my voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed."

Let me close by telling you about an exercise I read about that illustrates how our first inclination is to save our own lives when God wants us to be as mindful of the unfamiliar other as we are of ourselves, our family, our race or our country.

The exercise leader gave everyone a colorful balloon and asked the participants to blow them up and then put their names on them with a marker. Then all the balloons were placed in an adjacent room on the floor. When the group was allowed into the room, they were told they had five minutes to find the balloon with their name on it.

Everyone began frantically running about picking up a balloon then discarding it and racing to the next. They were colliding with each other and in some cases pushing one another aside. It was absolute chaos.

When the five minutes was up, very few of the panting participants had found their own balloon. The speaker then asked each person to pick up the balloon nearest them and read the name on it aloud. Within a minute or two everyone had his or her own balloon.

On the cross, we say Jesus died for everyone. When we decide that every person is as important as every other and we live that way, the messiah will return in glory with the holy angels to make a permanent home with us. AMEN.