



*Pushing back on the Powers*  
February 28, 2021: The Second Sunday in Lent  
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*Oh Lord: Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

Jamie and I recently watched a movie called “Dark Waters,” a dramatization of the true story of the systematic poisoning of Parkersburg, West Virginia by the DuPont chemical company.

A young attorney, the grandson of a resident of Parkersburg, has recently made partner in a prestigious Cincinnati law firm. But as a favor to his grandmother, he looks into the claims of local farmer that something has been killing his livestock and making his family sick. As the young attorney gets closer to the truth, DuPont and its allies rise up and push back. Threats and robberies and other harms begin to befall the truth seekers. People continue to sicken and die because of the poisons in the water. The attorney’s physical and mental health, and that of his family, suffer greatly. But he will not give up following the facts where they lead, in order to protect the public, and bring justice to the victims.

Corporate America. Immense power, both economic and political. Not likely to sit idly by when profits are threatened.

This story came to mind as I reflected on the Gospel for today. Jesus and Peter are having a frank conversation as they journey with the disciples in the long shadow of the Roman Empire, with powers that corporate America could only dream about. Just a few verses earlier, Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Holy One, the Anointed One, the Christ. The text tells us that they are in the region of Caesarea Philippi—a city named to honor Augustus Caesar by Philip who ruled the region, by collaborating with Rome.

Now that Peter has shown that he is all in, Jesus can get serious about the business of teaching what discipleship means. He then gives what is not so much a prediction of his death, as it is a teaching about the suffering that will take place when one pushes against the powers that be. Jesus will be executed by the power of the Roman state for sedition, in collaboration with corrupt religious leaders. And for that matter, so will Peter and many of the other disciples.

A dramatic exchange ensues. Peter pulls Jesus aside and privately rebukes him for this crazy talk about suffering. Jesus rebukes Peter back, in front of the disciples, quite sternly. He calls Peter “Satan,” literally, “tester of loyalties.” (Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, p. 232) To be fair to Peter, the idea of a suffering Messiah, rather than a mighty powerful one, was completely alien to Jewish expectations of the time.

And then Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

I hope you’ll stick with me as I muse on this powerful invitation.



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Jesus' introduction of the cross into his teaching is electrifying. The cross was a public method of torture and execution used by the Romans particularly against insurrectionists and rebels, as a warning to those who might contemplate any sort of future defiance. For example, around the time that Jesus was born, the Romans put down a revolt in Judea, including in parts of Galilee. They crucified 2000 Jews.

<https://pages.uncc.edu/james-tabor/archaeology-and-the-dead-sea-scrolls/josephus-references-to-crucifixion/> Part of the punishment for the victim included literally carrying the crossbar of the cross to the site of execution. For moderns, and particularly black people, hearing Jesus say this would be something akin to hearing Martin Luther King say, "Pick up your rope and follow me to the nearest tree."

Jesus is saying, if you want to be near me, then you need to follow me into the places where I go. And those are places where truth, love and justice are spoken. And there will be pushback. And that pushback is *the cross*. And Jesus also says, I will be there with you as you carry it, because I already have experienced the suffering you will encounter. The pushback of the powers is the cross that Jesus is talking about.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, a follower of Paul writes that, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*." (Eph. 6.12) Jesus fought these, and if we are to follow him, we will wrestle with them, too.

These powers and principalities are at work not just in the high places, but in our individual hearts and consciousness, in our families and relationships, in our workplaces and communities, as well as in the economic and political structures that reward the rich and powerful and punish the poor and weak. The cross is what rises up when we push back against these powers.

I know something about failing to follow Jesus because I make excuses, or point out the inconveniences, or would prefer to feel guilty rather than follow Jesus. When Jesus says, pick your cross and follow me, he's saying, come along with me, even with all your excuses for not doing the right thing (I'm afraid; it's inconvenient; it's too hard, it's not my fault) With my broken self, Jesus says, "Follow me anyway."

But I confess I know remarkably little about standing up to the powers and principalities when my own life is really at stake. My crosses, though real enough to me, feel small and petty.

Our African American siblings in Christ know something about the Cross and following Jesus. From what I read in a book called [The Cross and the Lynching Tree](#), theologian James Cone tells me that Jesus on the Cross recalls Black people's own suffering at the hands of the powers and principalities of white supremacy, epitomized in their own experience of the lynching tree. Lynching was a fact of life for southern blacks. From the 1870s to the 1960s, 1000s of African Americans suffered this fate. Yet by following Jesus through the agony that rose up simply because of the hue of their skin, they knew and know, his saving power. Cone writes that in the Black church of his Arkansas youth, where segregation and lynching were a fact of life, they "shouted, danced, clapped their hands and stomped their feet as they bore witness to the power of Jesus' cross, which had given them an identity far more meaningful



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than the harm that white supremacy could do to them.” The resurrected Jesus was present with them through it all.

Cone goes on to say that “the real scandal of the Gospel is this: humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst. Faith that emerged out of the scandal of the Cross is not a faith of intellectuals or elites of any sort. This is the faith of the abused and scandalized people—the losers and the down and out. It was this faith that gave black people the strength ‘to keep on keeping on,’ struggling against the odds.” (p.160)

It is the faith that powered the Civil Rights movement in the face of both hostility and indifference, and the faith that continues to stand up for the weak and powerless, like the families at B-Safe, or at MANNA, or at St. Luc’s in Lazile. It is a faith most of us have not had to summon, but that we all are invited into.

I confess that I tried to find a way out of speaking about lynching in this sermon. But I couldn’t. It was just there. It wouldn’t be hidden. Plain as the cross, though a small one for us to carry. I hope we’ve been following Jesus in the right direction.

**Amen.**