

The 2nd Sunday in Lent (Year B)

March 1, 2015

#TheDress

The Reverend Amanda A. Akes

Appointed Readings:

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalms 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

Earlier this week, I logged onto my Facebook account. For those unfamiliar with the website, Facebook is an online social networking tool, used to connect people through shared pictures and stories. I check my Facebook page numerous times a day. Earlier this week when I signed onto my account, I noticed that one story seemed to be prominent in my newsfeed. One picture kept popping up again and again, posted by different friends. This isn't terribly unusual, especially if a number of my friends are at the same event and post about it. But that wasn't what was happening this time. In this instance, the post was about a dress. This dress.

Have you heard about this? On Tuesday, 21-year-old Scotland native, Caitlin McNeill posted a photo of this dress on the social networking site Tumblr. Caitlin was seeking help from the online community in distinguishing the color of this dress, which she and her friends saw differently. There were two schools of thought. Some of Caitlin's friends said the dress was white and gold, while the others thought the dress was

blue and black. The friends were divided and couldn't come to a consensus on what color the dress actually was. So, Caitlin took a picture of the dress, this picture, and posted it to Tumblr with the caption "Guys please help – is this dress white and gold, or blue and black?" What do you think?

By Wednesday, the following night, Caitlin's post of the dress had gone viral. People had reposted the image and articles about the image on various social media outlets. It became an Internet phenomenon, drawing the attention of celebrities like Taylor Swift and Kanye West, as well as politicians like Connecticut Senator Christopher Murphy. Everyone had an opinion. It's white and gold; no it's blue and black.

The manufacturer, Roman Originals, put the debate to rest by announcing that the dress is in fact blue and black. That answer however doesn't explain why the reason people perceived the same image in different ways. NPR turned to neuroscientists to explain this phenomenon. The New York Times interviewed optometrists for their professional opinion on the debate. The specialists' consensus is that "our perception of color depends on interpreting the amount of light in a scene. When cues about the ambient light are missing, people may perceive the same color in different ways." Or in other words, interpretation depends on perception. Understanding depends on conditioning.

The same rings true in our gospel story today. This is a story of contradictions and perplexities. It contains a clash of understandings and expectations. Again, with two primary schools of thought. The first is the understanding or expectation of Jesus and the second is the understanding or expectation of Peter, who often represents the disciples as a whole in the gospels, and by default all who would be followers of Jesus, including us.

When Jesus tells the disciples that he would undergo great suffering, rejection, and death, he essentially deals them a punch to the gut and the heart. This news would have been the most shocking and devastating news his followers could have imagined.

Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary, Michael Rogness writes, “We are so accustomed to the message of Jesus’ crucifixion that it is easy to overlook how jarring that prospect would have been for the disciples. The great hope of the Israelite people at that time was freedom from the Roman overlords. Having seen Jesus’ miracles, experienced his magnetic personality as they followed him, and watched him draw enthusiastic crowds, it would have been totally natural for them to assume that Jesus would somehow challenge the servility they lived under with the Romans.”

Jesus filled everyone he encountered with hope, especially his disciples who were with him constantly. His followers truly believed that he was the Holy One of God, sent to them by God to issue in God’s reign of

political freedom and liberation. But then by describing his rejection and death, Jesus dashed those hopes. How can one gain political liberation through death? Peter seeks to steer Jesus in another direction. And it's here that we witness that clash of understandings and expectations, that difference in vision and interpretation.

Peter and the disciples yearn for the reign of God on their own terms. They did not yet understand that Jesus wasn't concerned with political power. After all, the messiah was supposed to inherit the throne of his ancestor, King David. It's fair to say the disciples were probably envisioning that Jesus would claim that throne at some point and become a powerful messiah king, liberating them from the oppression of their Roman occupiers.

But that is not what Jesus envisioned for himself. He envisioned liberation not from the tyranny of Rome alone, but liberation from the tyranny of sin. Jesus envisioned the defeat not of the Roman Empire, but of death. And in order to bring about this liberating reign of God, Jesus foresaw the sacrifice he would need to make. And as shocking as that news was to the disciples, it was probably even more unnerving when Jesus suggests that his way of the cross may well be their future too.

"If any want to be my followers," Jesus says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." For most of us, and probably for the disciples too, our own life tends to come first. Denying

ourselves is not a pastime many of us enjoy. In fact, in our culture, we're often encouraged not to deny ourselves, but to indulge ourselves. Professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary, Marilyn Salmon writes, "We might be kind and generous and thoughtful toward others, yet cultural norms dictate the priority of our own safety or privilege or physical comfort. Jesus advocates risking your life for the sake of another. In other words be willing to lose your life for the sake of the gospel in order to save it." And then comes that last part... "take up your cross and follow me."

Cross-bearing is a misunderstood concept in our society. I hear people say, "That's my cross to bear," when they're talking about a physical infirmity, or coping with a difficult child, or some such thing. But cross-bearing should not to be confused with patient suffering or persevering in the face of adversity. Cross-bearing is what happens when you risk suffering and shame for doing what's right for the sake of others.

Jesus anticipated his life ending in a catastrophic way. It's a fate that most of the prophets endured because they challenge the system. But Jesus also anticipated God's faithfulness and God's saving help even in the valley of the shadow of death. Though the prospect of suffering, rejection, and death are far from appealing, these things are not the end of the story. Jesus invites his followers to follow him through these things to be raised again into new life with him.

There are times when we see with eyes like Peter and the disciples, when we see something a certain way and believe it to be true. But faith calls us beyond our own vision and perception. Faith calls us to trust in Jesus, whose perception and vision is rooted in deep trust with God's will.

Was Jesus' mission political and national liberation or was it liberation from death and sin? Do you see the dress as white and gold or blue and black? As the specialists said, interpretation depends on perception. Understanding depends on conditioning. How do you perceive Jesus' message in our Gospel passage? What are your expectations of the messiah? Are you willing to follow Jesus wherever that may lead? Are you willing to risk your perception, even if you're convinced you're right, for the possibility that you could be wrong? A powerful quandary as we delve deeper into Lent, deeper into the wilderness, and deeper into God. Amen.