May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Maybe we’re not so different from Peter, when he said: “You know I just didn’t like the whole suffering and dying thing. I didn’t get it. That’s not what I signed up for. That’s not who I thought the Messiah would be.”

Jesus has a very different understanding of discipleship than what most of us probably want. Have you ever been asking Jesus why he doesn’t do what we want? Why won’t he see the world our way? It all seems so clear to us.

\* If he can heal Peter’s mother in law why not those we love?

\* If he can cleanse the leper why does our life sometimes leave us feeling unclean and isolated?

\* If he can make the paralytic walk why are so many crippled by fear, dementia, or addiction?

\* If he can calm the sea surely he could calm the storms of our world (Covid, poverty, war, violence).

\* If he can keep Jairus’ daughter from dying why not our children, our friends, our loved ones?

\* If he can feed 5000 with a few fish and pieces of bread why does much of the world to go to bed hungry?

I have wondered about these things. I have been asked these kind of questions. I know some who have lost faith and left the Church over these things. These are our rebukes of Jesus. He is not being or acting like we want. Sometimes his words challenge and shock us. Maybe we’re not so different from Peter.

Just a few verses before today’s gospel Jesus asks, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Peter names him as “*the Christ*,” the Messiah, the Anointed one of God. Jesus is the one of whom the prophets spoke, the one for who Israel has waited, the one who was supposed to restore God’s people. Peter is right and yet he also does not understand.

Peter has an image of what the Messiah is supposed to do and who the Messiah is supposed to be. We all have our own images and wishes about who Jesus is and what he should do. All is well when Jesus is casting out demons, healing the sick, preventing death, and feeding the multitudes. We like that Jesus. We want to follow that Jesus. He is our Lord and Savior.

Jesus will not, however, fit to our images of who we think he is or who we want him to be. Instead, he asks us to fit to who he knows himself to be: the one who “*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*.” He sets a choice before us. It is a choice we each have to make. Again and again the circumstances of life set that choice before us.

We either choose ourselves and deny Jesus or we deny ourselves and choose Jesus. “*If any want to become my followers*,” he says, “*let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*.” Self denial is the beginning of discipleship.

I’m wondering how often we understand and practice our faith as daily self denial? The way of Christ…, self-denial, reminds us that our life is not our own. It belongs to God. It reminds us that we are not in control, God is. Our life is not about us. It is about God. Through self denial our falling down becomes rising up, losing is saving, and death is resurrection.

As long as we believe our life is about us we will continue to exercise power over others, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus. Self denial is not about being out of control or powerless. It is about the choices we make.

Jesus chose to give in a world that takes, to love in a world that hates, to heal in a world that injures, to give life in a world that kills. He offered mercy when others sought vengeance…, forgiveness when others condemned…, and compassion when others were indifferent. With each choice he denied himself and showed God was present.

At some point those kind of choices will catch the attention of and offend those who live and profit by power, control, and looking out for number one. They will not deny themselves. They will respond. Jesus said they would. He knew that he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. It happens in every age for those who choose the path of self denial. When it happened for Jesus he made one last choice. He chose resurrection over survival. Amen.