

This is not what I signed up for

Texts: **Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:53-69**; “*Unexpected Change*”, from Robert Penn Warren ***All The King’s Men***

Noah and Emily just had their 12th birthday yesterday. That had me thinking back to when they were first born. We’d been expecting them early, since they were twins, but they just weren’t coming, and Kate was getting more and more uncomfortable. A visit to the doctor on the afternoon of the 20th set the C-section for the next day, August 21st, 2009. And so, about 10:30am on the 21st, after months of anxious waiting, Noah entered the world at 7lbs 7 ounces, and one minute later, Emily came in at 7lbs, a total of 14.7lbs of babies. No wonder Kate was miserable!

And then our lives changed in ways we hadn’t expected. Neither twin slept well at first. And with twins, it’s never “Uhh, honey, it’s your turn,” because it’s always your turn for both of you! It got so bad that on one trip to the store for diaper rash cream I was hallucinating animals running across the road in front of me. When I got home and told Kate, she rebuked me: “I told you you were too tired to go!” To which I replied, “Well, I didn’t hit any of ‘em!”

It’s about this time that parents start thinking, “What have we done?” When imagining what it would be like to be a parent, this wasn’t it! This is not what I signed up for!

I think this is what some of Jesus’ disciples must have been feeling in our text today: “*This isn’t what I signed on for. I thought this was going to be fun. I thought I would get to see miracles. I thought we were going to rule in God’s kingdom. I thought I would get a chance to get in on the ground floor to what God was doing, but THIS has just gotten way out of control. The religious leaders are against us and are telling us we’re immoral sinners for following Jesus. King Herod wants to kill us, has already killed John the Baptist, and we’re probably next. And now, Jesus is talking like a crazy man about eating his flesh and blood. I’m outta here.*”

And, as the text tells us next, some of Jesus’ disciples *did* leave him and went home. So some of Jesus’ followers became ex-followers. What happened? Well, first there was the opposition from the religious leaders and danger from the political leaders. They might have continued even with that if they thought Jesus was in his right mind. But then he says things like, “My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them,” and that, on top of everything else, is just too much for them.

Some people hear what Jesus is saying and take him literally, and taken literally, it sounds literally insane! We know that he is referring to the Lord’s Supper, to the mystical communion Jesus’ shares with his followers in the bread and the wine, but *they* have no way of knowing that. It hasn’t happened yet. There is no Lord’s Supper until Passover night just before the crucifixion, so for some followers who are very literal minded, what Jesus has just said is a shocking and horrifying thing.

“This is a hard saying,” they say, “who can accept it?” What the Greek text actually says is even stronger: “This is a hard speech. Who can listen to it?” It’s so bad that they don’t even want to listen to such talk anymore. And honestly, *who would* if you were forced to take it all literally. Cannibalism doesn’t recommend itself easily to very many people.

Now you might say to yourself, “No way. No one would ever think Jesus meant that literally. It’s impossible to understand Jesus’ words that way, to hear them and think: Cannibalism!” I should tell you, however, that one of the most frequent charges against the early Christians in the Roman world of the first and second centuries was that of cannibalism. People in the street overhearing communion services through the thin walls of houses, heard the words, “Take and eat, this is my body,” and, “This is the new covenant in my blood, all of you drink from it,” and easily took away a literal act of cannibalism and reported the meeting to the local authorities.

Jesus tries to explain that the words he has spoken are spirit and life - that is, that it’s not to be taken literally, but it’s still too much for some people. Jesus knows some of his followers are grumbling, and he says to them, “Are you having trouble with *this*? Then how hard will it be for you to understand when the Son of Man ascends to where he was before!” that is, when the news of the resurrection comes to you.

Jesus points to the future, to the time when he will ascend to God his parent, and in this way, asks the disciples to wait until they know the full story before they give up on him. “You don’t know what’s going to happen yet, so hang in there. It may yet turn out to be even better than what you signed up for.” Of course, that was still hard for his disciples in the moment. People were asking more questions about him, and when he added to his strange sayings about body and blood a statement that he came down from heaven, that really didn’t clear things up for them! It just muddled the waters even more. We know something about the incarnation, but they didn’t.

For many, the response was simply: “Him, come down from heaven? What’s he talking about? Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’? That’s insane. He’s not from heaven. He’s from Nazareth.” You can almost hear some ancient wit adding, “Yeah, I’ve been to Nazareth, and *no one* who’s been *there* would think *that* place was heaven.”

And so the text says, it was just too much for some people. It was the final straw. “From this time on,” the text says, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” It’s so easy for us to read right over this verse, to just forget that a lot of people left Jesus even during his lifetime, because it was hard and his teachings were hard, sometimes almost unbelievable. It simply wasn’t what they signed up for when they started following him. They weren’t going to wait to find out whether it was true or not.

I think we get how hard it is to follow Jesus from the middle of life. Sometimes we find that Jesus’ teachings are still hard today. It’s not easy to put others first. It’s not easy to work for justice when injustice pays off for so many. It’s not easy to stand up to sexism or homophobia or racism when being sexist, racist, and homophobic is a badge of honor for some people in our society. And sometimes it’s hard because our own circumstances aren’t what we thought we would get as followers of Jesus. We are doing our best to trust in God, but children like little Raegan still die.

We are putting our hope in Jesus, but then we or someone we know gets Covid and dies, in spite of our prayers. We believe in loving God and loving our neighbor, but now we’re stuck in a divorce where love wasn’t enough. Where is Jesus? Why isn’t God acting to stop all of this from happening? Wasn’t life supposed to be so much different from following Jesus? Maybe we’re starting to think, *This isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. This isn’t what I signed up for.* Just as it was true back then, so it’s true now: following Jesus is hard!

The most incredible thing of all is, Jesus gets this. He understands how hard it is, and that following him can bring challenges we just wouldn’t have otherwise. He knows that the first vision we had, of being protected from the ups and downs of the world by following him, just isn’t going to happen and it’s disappointing. He’s upfront about it when he asks those first disciples of his inner circle, right after

the others have left, “Do you want to leave me, too? Is it too hard for you?” And I like what Peter says. He doesn’t say, “No way. We’re in this, we completely believe, we’ve never even thought of leaving.” No, instead he says, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” In other words, he admits, “Yeah, we’ve thought about it, but there really is no one else. There’s nowhere else to go, even though it’s hard.”

Peter tells Jesus why he’s staying and why the others are staying in spite of how hard it is: “You have the words of eternal life, even if sometimes those words are hard. And we have seen who you are and what you can do. We believe that you are the Holy One of God.”

Even when things are not what they expected, not what they signed up for, Peter and the others who stay have seen and heard enough to know that Jesus is special. Jesus has healed enough people that they trust him, even if he hasn’t healed everyone. Jesus speaks in ways that are so profound that when he says something they don’t understand, they’re willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and wait and see. They don’t know what will happen, but they have seen enough to trust that it will turn out right. Jesus is worth hanging on to even when everything is a complete mess, because he has enough credibility with them that they can live with a little uncertainty in the moment, trusting that in the end, it’s all going to work out and make sense. And they did all that before the resurrection happened!

Sometimes we’ll feel that this isn’t what we signed up for yet, but we have good hopes that it might still turn out all right. Jesus has the words and deeds of life often enough, that they can trust him for the rest before it’s all over.

Here we are 12 years later, and having Noah and Emily as my kids (and Adam too), is just as great an adventure as I might ever have hoped for. It was hard at first, it wasn’t what I had naively thought I was signing up for, but the payoff is already a million times better than I could have imagined. In the long run, parenting them has been everything I signed up for, and so much more.

In spite of the difficulties of this world that persist even as I follow Jesus, I’m just as convinced that, in the end, following him will be all that we signed up for, and more than we can even imagine. Amen