We have before us in our Gospel reading this morning some stern words from our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was teaching about his upcoming suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. And the lead disciple, the spokesman for the disciples, takes Jesus aside and presumes to rebuke him. And Jesus responds with the strongest possible words—with words stronger than he ever says to the Pharisees or to the Roman soldiers and magistrates who presided over his death. Worse than a brood of vipers, worse than a white-washed tomb, worse than a dog, Jesus calls Peter Satan, “Get behind me, Satan!” And then turning to the rest of the disciples he interprets for them, and for us, what Peter was doing.

“No one who is ashamed of me and of my words, … of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:38)

Peter was ashamed of Jesus’ words. Peter was ashamed of Jesus. And Jesus takes the opportunity to warn the rest of his disciples, and so also to warn us, that our stance toward Jesus in this life anticipates the stance that he will take toward us when he comes in glory.

I think that there are several possible temptations for us as we hear words like this. The first possible temptation that I see is for us to want to be nicer than Jesus himself is. It perhaps sounds unloving that Jesus would say he could be ashamed of anyone, let alone us. The temptation here is to have some idea of what love is, and test Jesus against that idea of love. What happens here, is that when we attempt to test Jesus against some idea of love, Jesus will always fall short.

The second temptation that I perceive is for us to hear Jesus’ words but to assume that Jesus didn’t really mean what he said. Perhaps we don’t assume that Jesus is flat out wrong, but that Jesus was using this merely as a rhetorical device of some kind. I think the real temptation in this response, and perhaps also the temptation that Peter had here succumbed to, is to think that we can know Jesus apart from how he makes himself known, to know Jesus apart from how he reveals himself. Peter had an idea of what Jesus was supposed to do, and the cross did not fit into that. We too have our ideas about Jesus, but can these ideas stand up against what Jesus says about himself, can these ideas stand up against what Jesus actually does? The
temptation is to cling to our ideas about Jesus, or our ideas about Jesus’ mission, more than clinging to Jesus himself. What happens here is that, in a subtle way, we begin to leave Jesus behind.

The third temptation that I think we are susceptible to, is to think that there is no hope for us, Jesus is and will be ashamed of us, now and forever. We know that we have not lived as we ought to have, we have not taken up our cross to die, we know that we have at times been ashamed of Jesus, or perhaps even fear that we are always ashamed of him, and we think that Jesus is nothing but ashamed of us. Well, I think that each of these three responses are equally wrong, are true temptations, tempting us away from the blessing that Jesus wants to give to us even through such frightening words.

Might I suggest that we, much as Pastor Fryer encouraged us to do in his sermon on Wednesday, might I suggest that we wrestle with Jesus’ words here. As Jacob wrestled with the man who was also God, wrestling until the break of day so that he might receive a blessing, so too let us wrestle with Jesus. We wrestle with him by wrestling with his words, the words of this man who is also God. And if we persevere, if we keep from clinging to our ideas of Jesus more than to Jesus himself, and if we keep from despairing of all hope, if we wrestle with these words, we will receive the blessing of Jesus. For Jesus has given us his word, his very own word, that testifies to him and tells of him, for the very reason that we might wrestle with it and thereby wrestle with him.

So let us look at this text again. Jesus was teaching, as he often did. But instead of telling parables, Jesus tells them plainly that he must “suffer many things,” be “rejected,” “killed,” and after “three days rise again.” Immediately before our passage, Jesus and the disciples had been walking between two towns. On the way, Jesus asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, answering for all of the disciples, makes the great confession of who Jesus is: “You are the Christ,” he says. With this, Peter is saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of Israel's hopes, the one promised to Eve and to Abraham. But when they get to the town, Jesus starts saying that he will suffer and die. This was too much for Peter. Peter takes Jesus aside, away from the crowd, and presumes to rebuke the same one that he had just called the Christ, the Messiah. We are not told exactly what Peter said to Jesus, but it is clear that Peter rebuked Jesus on account of what Jesus had just been teaching. For Peter, the death of Christ, the cross of Christ was a scandal, a stumbling block, something inappropriate for the Son of Man to bear. If Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the one that Israel had been waiting for, the prophet foretold, could he be rejected and killed?

Peter thought that he had Jesus figured out, had understood the mission and plan of Jesus. Peter had an idea of what the Messiah was supposed to be like, and he determined to test Jesus against that idea. Whatever Peter thought of Jesus and his ministry, of Jesus and his mission, of
Jesus and Jesus’ love for humanity, the cross didn’t fit in well with it. The cross didn’t figure into Peter’s understanding of Jesus. And Jesus tells Peter, and tells us, who the father of this deception is. Jesus tells us the spirit who inspires such thoughts: “Get behind me, Satan!”

I think it would be easy for us to be overly critical of Peter at this point. Perhaps we would not be so bold to rebuke Jesus, but perhaps this is only because we are not as bold as Peter. Perhaps we too have convictions about what type of savior this world needs, or perhaps we might even debate whether the world needs a savior at all. Jesus is showing Peter that he needs to let Jesus himself fill in the content of what the word “Christ” means, what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and Savior.

But Jesus knows that this is not just something that Peter will be tempted by, so he calls the rest of his disciples to him, and interprets for them what had just happened. And, because the Holy Spirit saw fit for this to be written down for our instruction, so too we know that this is a temptation for each of us who hear the message of Jesus. So Jesus goes on to say,

“If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:34–36)

Jesus had been teaching that he must suffer and be killed, but now he teaches that anyone who wants to be one of his disciples must also suffer, Jesus’ disciples also must take up their cross. For the mission of Jesus is to go to the cross, and to follow him is also to take up a cross, to walk a long road of dying with Christ.

But Jesus had not just been talking about his impending death. For Jesus’ death on Good Friday cannot really be spoken of without also speaking of his Resurrection. Jesus had said that he would suffer and be killed, but after three days he would rise. And if this is true of Jesus, then those who follow him shall have a similar story, so Jesus says, “whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it.” Taking up a cross and following Jesus is the only way to find life. The Christian life, then, looks like nothing other than death, yet death manifesting life, life abundant, the very life of Christ.

Peter’s idea of a savior, of a Messiah, didn’t have room for suffering and death. Does our understanding of the Christian life have the cross at the center or it? If not, then perhaps we too need to hear Jesus’ last words from our reading,

“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:38)
Jesus shows that anything less than taking up a cross, anything less than
dying with Christ so that life might be found, is actually taking a stance
toward Jesus himself, is nothing less than being ashamed of Jesus. And Jesus’
words here are indeed frightening, if we are ashamed of him, he too will be
ashamed of us.

I think that this is a point where we ought to take some pause. I think
that this is a point where we, like Peter, might be in danger of having some
idea of a savior that we bring to the table, as it were, but that doesn’t quite fit
with the one that meets us at that table. Perhaps we think it absurd that Peter
would presume to take Jesus aside and rebuke him, but might we want to take
him aside and question him on whether or not Jesus could ever be ashamed of
us? Might we have an idea of a savior or a Messiah who has no place for
shame, especially not a possibility of being ashamed of us?

I am convinced, that if we wrestle with Jesus’ words here, which is the
way that Jesus has given for us to wrestle with him, if we do not pass by these
words, if we do not assume that they are not for us, if we do not assume that
they are not directed at us, then I am convinced that we will receive nothing
less than what Jacob received when he wrestled with the man who was also
God. The blessing that Jacob received was, in Jacob’s own words, “I have seen
God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” If we persist in wrestling with
Jesus, we too shall see God, face to face, and have our life preserved, saved.

To illustrate what this looks like, we need not look further than Peter
himself. Peter here has been confronted with the reality that he has notions of
who Jesus is supposed to be that do not fit with Jesus himself. Peter now has
the opportunity to hold on to his ideas of what Jesus ought to be, and lose
Jesus, or he can hold on to Jesus, cling to him though it will mean death for
Peter, taking up a cross in order to follow him. For Peter, there was no longer
an option of claiming that he was not ashamed of Jesus. Jesus himself had
said so to Peter and all of the disciples. We too can admit that we are at times
ashamed of Jesus, we can dare, indeed, to admit that we are sinners, because
Jesus has died for such, Jesus has died for the shameful and sinners of the
world. If Jesus has gone all the way to death and hell for us, if he has died for
sinners, then we can dare to be counted amongst those for whom he died, we
can dare to admit that we have been ashamed of Christ. It is never to our peril
to admit that we have sinned against the Lord, to admit that we are at times
ashamed of Jesus and his words, for even in our shame, even in our
ashamedness, Jesus has befriended us, scorn the shame of the cross for
us, the shame which was our shame, so that we might glory in him, delight in
him and his words. Jesus has died for sinners, not so that they continue in sin,
but so that sin may be eliminated from their lives altogether.

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1 I am here following the logic, but changing the wording, of Paul Hinlicky, “The Christian Faith and the Nuclear Morass,” 70–71.
Peter continued to wrestle with Jesus. And for Peter, it took Jesus coming to him after the resurrection, and restoring him, reconciling Peter to himself, so that Peter might finally recognize the sinner that he was, so that Peter might finally see that he was yet ashamed of Jesus. And after Jesus restored Peter, Peter so gloried in the cross of Christ that Peter too someday went up on a cross and was crucified for Jesus. He honored and gloried in the cross of Christ so much that he took up a cross and followed Jesus all the way to his own crucifixion.

Each of the three temptations I mentioned at the beginning are a failure to reckon fully with Jesus himself, a failure to reckon with the offense of the cross of Christ. Indeed, Jesus is love incarnate, love in person, but we see what love means pre-eminently in the cross. This leaves no room for simple or naïve notions of niceness, the cross leaves no space for love that doesn’t include within it a struggle and a fight to the death and yet further. The cross leaves no room for holding on to ideas about Jesus that bypass the shame of the cross. And in the last temptation, reckoning fully with the cross leaves no room for despair, leaves no room for hopelessness.

If we hold on to Jesus more than to our ideas about Jesus, more than our ideas of love or shame or justice or any other notion, we will find that our very wants and desires and hopes are being re-ordered. We will find that our lives are being ordered around Jesus’ life, and that bearing a cross and following him is life itself. For this is precisely what happened with Peter. Just as with Peter it took the resurrected Christ coming to him for Peter to finally glory in the cross and not be ashamed of Jesus, so too Jesus comes to us today, in word and sacrament, in bread and cup, reconciling us to himself, reordering our thoughts and desires, our wants and our hopes, so that we want nothing but Jesus and him crucified.

If Christ has died for sinners, than for sinners such as you and me, there is nothing left but hope in Christ, glorying in the cross of Christ, despising the shame of our cross because Jesus bears us and our cross in himself, to the glory of his Father, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.