Let me begin by stating the obvious: Jesus was not interested in winning the popular vote. Nor was he counting on the Electoral College if he lost the popular vote. And he certainly wasn’t trying to whip up popular support for a Jerusalem insurrection that would install him by force as King Jesus.

If he wanted any of those things, he wouldn’t have said to his disciples: *The Son of Man 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.* This MUST Jesus describes about suffering, rejection, death and resurrection is, to say the least, an unpopular must, don’t you know?!

But that raises the question: Why *must* he? Why must he suffer and die and then be raised? We can speculate on all that about Jesus, but it gets more personal when he addresses us in similar fashion. *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.* It seems at first a bit softer on us, as if he must but we may. It amounts the same thing, though: like him, we must die to live.

Our theme for Lent this year is *dying to live.* And if we apply that to Jesus’ words here, we may find insight into his mindset. On the other hand, we may misunderstand him as we often have.

For instance, we may think that Jesus is making a general statement that the essence of life is that we must suffer and die, so any suffering and death we experience is a sign we’re on the right track. But that would go against the life force God has put into us as created beings. It could also lead us into all sorts of nonsense whereby we might hurt ourselves or seek to be martyrs in the name of God or for the sake of the gospel so that we can be true to his words.

Many of us have suffered in various ways this past week or...
two—maybe with COVID, maybe because of COVID with loneliness and isolation, maybe from the loss of electricity or water damage to our homes, maybe due to other undisclosed illnesses or griefs. These are real and painful, and I pray you have felt the presence of God with you in and through them. I know I have. But this isn’t what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus had a healing ministry. He relieved suffering; he didn’t just tell suffering people they were in the right position to understand God’s will since God wills suffering. No, God is with us, for us in our suffering and death, and there will come a time when mourning and crying are no more. We are to be about the same work of Jesus in relieving suffering in others and pointing to abundant life in Christ.

What’s more, if we think we are suffering persecution any time people oppose or reject us as if that’s a sign we are doing right, we need to be careful—it may be that we are being jerks, not saints.

Another way of misunderstanding Jesus’ must is that he had to satisfy the wrath of God on the world’s sin by suffering and dying. This longstanding interpretation of Jesus’ death on the cross needs correcting. God didn’t crucify Jesus in order to satisfy God’s anger or restore God’s honor. Human beings killed Jesus, thinking that by scapegoating him they could secure peace with God and Rome. God isn’t cruel, even for some greater purpose. God is love, period. Therefore, violence committed against another human being is never sacred.

That Jesus must have suffered and that we must is more about human resistance to the way of God than acquiescence to it. When Peter rebuked Jesus for saying these things—and I love that, Peter rebuking Jesus, imagine that!—Jesus calls him Satan and tells him to get behind him, because he is thinking with a human not a divine mindset.

Jesus has heard this temptation before during his time in the wilderness. Satan tempted him to avoid the way of suffering and death as the way of life. The name Satan means literally adversary. Peter, who has just declared Jesus to be the Messiah, suddenly is now called the adversary, someone who is in the way of Jesus’ true way. If he
wants to be on Jesus’ side, he has to side with Jesus. And that would lead inevitably to suffering, rejection and death.

When Jesus says he will suffer, be rejected and killed and after three days be raised, he is simply describing the inevitability of it. Jesus is not a populist politician who would sacrifice others for his own success; he is a self-sacrificing savior.

The powerful of this world, and most of the powerless too, will always reject a messiah who rejects violence as a means to an end and who will instead love the world to death—literally. Jesus’ nonviolent way of redemption rescues the world from its never-ending cycles of violence that spring from fear and always lead to death. A philosophy of looking out for yourself at the expense of others is so contrary to Jesus’ dying-to-live way that amounts to living-to-die.

In the new movie by Shaka King, provocatively titled Judas and the Black Messiah, we see the tragic story unfold of William O’Neal. O’Neal was recruited at 17 by the FBI in exchange for being let go from his arrest for stealing a car. He became an informant against Fred Hampton, the Chicago leader of the revolutionary Black Panther Party in the late 1960s that sought to overthrow the government and the capitalist system that they believed so oppressed Black people. O’Neal became part of Hampton’s security detail and was his personal driver. He secretly drugged Hampton at the direction of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and set him up for the G-men’s raid on his apartment that killed Hampton and everyone in it, except for Hampton’s pregnant wife.

About 20 years later, PBS did a documentary about the government’s assassination of Hampton and O’Neal’s role in it. The producers found O’Neal and interviewed him. Although he said he would leave it to others to judge, he was so racked with guilt over his attempt to save his life at the expense of Hampton, he committed suicide shortly after the release of the film. Whoever would save his life will lose it.

Jesus calls us to deny self, take up our cross and follow him. This willing self-sacrifice is the heart of the gospel. In our baptism, just as in Jesus’
baptism, we let go of any effort to save ourselves by ourselves. Life is not grasped; it is given. God is the giver who can be trusted even in death.

When the Soviet dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, described his imprisonment in *The Gulag Archipelago*, he got to the essence of Jesus’ call to die to self. *From the moment you go to prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself, 'My life is over, a little early, to be sure, but there’s nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die—now or a little later . . .' Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogator will tremble. Only the [person] who has renounced everything can win that victory.*

This gets to the secret of dying to live. The world thinks we will do anything to preserve our own life because it assumes this is the only field we play on. But when we determine not to play the world’s game, it doesn’t know what to do with us. We don’t win by playing the world’s game better than they do. They play a power game. Jesus plays a love game. And love wins.

To live like this, you need the spiritual imagination Jesus describes that involves thinking divinely. Peter calls Jesus the messiah, and that he was. But Jesus immediately calls himself the Son of Man, a title that comes from the Hebrew book of Daniel. Daniel describes the Son of Man as the true human, in contrast to the heathen powers depicted as beasts. The Son of Man, no doubt symbolizing Israel, is lauded for humility not strength. He is the one who will stand at the end of history in the courtroom of heaven. He has been condemned in the courtroom of earth but is vindicated in the courtroom of heaven by the Eternal and Righteous Judge, upheld and praised by the angels.

This is what Jesus means when he says that *for those who are ashamed of him and his words in this sinful and adulterous generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. We are always living*
simultaneously in two worlds: earthly and heavenly, visible and invisible, temporal and eternal. If here we suffer and are rejected, even killed, by the powers of this world for the sake of Christ and the gospel, Jesus is telling us we can be assured of resurrection life, nonetheless.

On the cross we see the Christ who died; in the resurrection we see the Christ who died to live. Whenever we deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow him, we know that same glorious power of eternal life, even in the here and now.

It's an unpopular must, but we must. Amen.