

March 13, 2022
Luke 13:31-35

Lent 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“I Won’t Back Down”

“... I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

On the occasion of its 100th anniversary, the American Film Institute published a list of the top fifty heroes in the history of motion pictures (they also published a list of the top fifty villains to bring the lists to 100). The list included many different types of heroic characters: some were fictional heroes such as Superman, Batman, Tarzan, and Han Solo; others were real-life heroes whose life stories were immortalized on film such as Mahatma Gandhi, Erin Brockovich, Lou Gehrig, and Oskar Schindler. The rest of the list included fictional characters who exemplified the characteristic of classic heroism: Indiana Jones, James Bond, Rick Blaine from “Casablanca,” Rocky Balboa, George Bailey from “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and Virgin Tibbs from “In the Heat of the Night.” But the number one hero on AFI’s list came as a surprise to many people: Atticus Finch from “To Kill a Mockingbird.” The story of a small-town Southern lawyer does not seem to be a likely place to find the greatest hero in film history; but the story told in Harper Lee’s famous book about a lawyer who agrees to defend a black man accused of the rape of a white woman is a true example of courage under fire, of a person who chooses to do what is right in the face of personal danger and enormous obstacles. When she was asked why she chose to create the character of Atticus Finch and place him at the center of her novel, Harper Lee gave a great definition of the nature of true heroism, of what it means to be a courageous person:

- “I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do.”

Atticus Finch did not win his case, but he does give us an example of heroism and courage, which is “*the ability to do something that frightens one.*” Courage does not mean that someone is not afraid of the dangers and obstacles that lie before them; in the words of Mark Twain, “*courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not the absence of fear.*” Truly courageous people do not possess superhuman powers, nor are they immune to the terror that accompanies overwhelming obstacles. Courage

sees the fear that lies in one's path and chooses to confront it, knowing that it is often through courage that fears are overcome and anything that threatens the life and happiness that are God's Will for humanity can triumph.

- “Courage faces fear and thereby masters it. Cowardice represses fear and is thereby mastered by it. Courageous men never lose the zest for living even though their life situation is zestless; cowardly men, overwhelmed by the uncertainties of life, lose the will to live.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

Today's Gospel lesson recounts a scene on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, a journey that began “*when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” (Luke 9:51). Jesus is fully aware of what awaits him when he enters the Holy City; before he begins this journey, he informs his disciples that “*the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” (9:22). Jesus knows that he is journeying to the place where he will suffer and die on the Cross for the sake of all humanity; it is a destination fraught with peril for our Lord, but Jesus courageously sets his face toward Jerusalem because he knows that it is there that he will fulfill the Will of God which is the salvation of all people through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.

As he continues this perilous journey, Jesus is met by a group of Pharisees who warn him to “*get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.*” (13:31). The Pharisees are presented here in a more positive light than in other parts of Luke, where they are presented as religious leaders who oppose Jesus (“*Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”*” – 5:21). But there are other occasions when Jesus is invited to dine in the home of Pharisees; St. Paul even identifies himself as a Pharisee (“*I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today.*” – Acts 22:3). There is no evidence here that the Pharisees are acting in concert with Herod or that they hoped to convince Jesus to leave Galilee so that they might more easily trap him in Jerusalem. Herod's desire to kill Jesus, while new information, is readily intelligible in light of the characterization of Herod in Luke. Herod is first introduced in Luke as the tetrarch of Galilee, the descendent of his father Herod the Great, the notorious figure who sought to kill Jesus in his infancy and was responsible for the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem in Matthew (“*When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were*

two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.” – Matthew 2:16). When John the Baptist spoke out against him, Herod Antipas had him imprisoned (*“But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodius, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison”* – Luke 3:19-20), and eventually orders the beheading of John the Baptist (*“... he sent and had John beheaded in the prison.”* – Matthew 14:10). Even though Herod had previously indicated his desire to see Jesus (Luke 9:9), the Pharisees’ fears for the safety of Jesus at the hands of the murderous Herod were well-founded.

Regardless of the trustworthiness of the Pharisees, Jesus sends them back with a message: *“Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’”* (13:32-33). Foxes in both Greek and rabbinic literature were depicted as crafty, sinister characters; in labeling Herod as a “fox,” Jesus is identifying him as someone who is sly, cunning, and voraciously destructive. Foxes are dangerous creatures who are to be feared; but Jesus announces to the Pharisees that Herod will not hinder him from completing his work. Jesus will continue to cast out demons and heal the sick, public acts that demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God that is greater than the power of the tetrarch of Galilee or even the Roman Empire. Jesus declares to Herod and to anyone else listening that he is determined to keep working today, tomorrow, and the third day when he will finish his work (*teleiounai*, “completed”). The three days declare the continuation and completion of Jesus’ work; they are explicitly related to Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem must by necessity be accomplished; Jesus *must* be on his way. Jesus does not travel to Jerusalem to escape death, but to die there. Jesus declares again the divine necessity of his work in fulfilling God’s redemptive purposes (*“For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.”* – 22:37). Jesus journeys to Jerusalem as a prophet obedient to God’s direction. His pronouncement foreshadows Stephen’s speech and his death as a martyr (*“Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.”* – Acts 7:52). Jesus’ upcoming death in Jerusalem places him in the line of other prophets who were killed in the Holy City: Uriah (Jeremiah 26:20-23), Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:20-22), and those killed by Manasseh (2 Kings 21:16). *“Both Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and his death there will be controlled by his faithfulness to God’s redemptive purposes, not by Herod”* (Alan Culpepper).

As Jesus refuses to allow Herod's threats to stop him from his divinely appointed journey to Jerusalem, he now turns his attention to the city where he will suffer the same fate as so many prophets who have come before him:

- “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” – 13:34-35.

The repeated address “Jerusalem, Jerusalem” is reminiscent of divine addresses in the Old Testament (“*Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’*” – 1 Samuel 3:10). The metaphor of Jerusalem as a mother and her inhabitants – or all Israel – as children is also rooted in the Old Testament (“*You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.*” – Isaiah 62:4). The image of a bird mothering her young also appears in the Hebrew Scriptures (“*... he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.*” – Psalm 91:4). Jesus has repeatedly offered Israel, God's people, his motherly love and protection, but they would not receive him (“*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*” – John 1:11). The result of this rejection of Jesus is that Israel's “house” is forsaken, again reminiscent of Jeremiah's pronouncement to the people of Judah: “*But if you do not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.*” (Jeremiah 22:5). Jesus declares that they will not see him until the time when they will declare, “*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord*” (Psalm 118:26). Jesus looks ahead to his coming as the Son of Man at the end of time:

- “Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.” – Acts 3:19-21.

Jesus would finally meet Herod in Jerusalem after his arrest and his trial before Pontius Pilate. When the chief priests inform Pilate that Jesus is from Galilee, Pilate seizes the opportunity to refer the case to Herod, who was in Jerusalem for the

Passover. Luke reports that *“when Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had wanted to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.”* (23:8). Herod’s desire to see a “sign” (*semeion*) was not a request that Jesus do something to confirm the truth of his teachings; he was merely curious about the rumours he had heard and hoped that Jesus might do something spectacular. Herod questions Jesus at length, but Jesus remained silent, thereby fulfilling Isaiah 53:7: *“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”* Jesus’ silence is an affront to Herod, which he answers to make sport of Jesus: *“Even Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt and mocked him; they he put an elegant robe on him and sent him back to Pilate.”* (23:11). Once again, Jesus’ adversaries fulfill his own prophecy: *“For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon.”* (18:32). Luke reports that after this *“Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.”* (23:12). They are reconciled to one another, but not to God. They have unwittingly fulfilled the words of Psalm 2:2 that prophesied that *“the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.’”* God has used these adversaries of our Lord as instruments through which God fulfills God’s will for all people in the Cross, the instrument of death that becomes the means of eternal life: *“For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”* (Acts 4:27). Jesus continued to face Herod with courage because he knew that God would use what others meant for harm to accomplish God’s Will *“in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

The courage that gave Jesus the strength to reject the threats of Herod and strive on toward Jerusalem was not a matter of misguided heroism or a denial of the threat that Herod and others posed to him, nor was it “fool’s errand” that Jesus undertakes without regard to his safety or the safety of his followers. The courage that gives Jesus the ability to continue this path is the gift that God bestows upon his children, a gift that gives them the strength to go forward even in the face of fear because it offers the assurance that God is always with us and will accomplish all that God intends through our faithfulness. It is the confidence that is expressed in the words of Psalm 27, the confession of faith that *“the LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?”*

... *Wait for the LORD, be strong, let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!*” (Psalm 27:1, 14). Our courage has its source in the confidence of God’s steadfast presence, that the Lord is our stronghold, our “mighty fortress,” and that even in life’s darkest moments, *“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”* (Psalm 23:4). We travel forth in the path of discipleship in the same confidence that guided God’s people in their often-perilous journeys, confident that *“the LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”* (Psalm 121:7-8).

- “This exhortation to be strong, have courage, and patiently wait presupposes another experience: the experience of God’s faithfulness ... In other words, we are not asked to manufacture strength, invent courage, concoct hope out of thin air, improvise a whole new outlook on life. This is not a self-help course, or ten steps toward positive living. It’s grace. It’s gospel. God is already ‘there’ for you – your ‘light and salvation,’ *is* the ‘stronghold of your life,’ is committed to you and will not ‘forsake’ you.” – Douglas John Hall.

Atticus Finch can rightfully be considered the greatest movie hero of all time not because he had superhuman powers or resources of strength not possessed by others. In many ways he was an ordinary person, but he was able to do extraordinary things because he chose the path of courage in the face of fear; he chose to take a stand for what was right even in the face of personal threats and public ridicule. He was not able to save the life of his client, but as he walked out of the courtroom the people in the segregated upper gallery stood because “a great man is passing by.”

We can be heroes, ordinary people who choose the path of courage not because it is easy or carefree, but because even though the path may be difficult and the fears overwhelming, we walk with confidence because we know that our Lord is with us every step of the way and will accomplish through us all that God wills for God’s people. Let us be strong and of good courage – God is with us!

Amen.