

## No Turning Back

Luke 13:31-35

Crossroads Christian Church

Psalms 27

February 21, 2016

Lent 2 C

One of my spiritual superheroes was Clarence Jordan. Clarence was a Southern Baptist from Georgia. He was always concerned for justice and for those who were poor and oppressed in the rural South. While working on an agricultural degree from the University of Georgia, he became convinced that the roots of poverty were spiritual as well as economic, so he went to seminary. He went on to receive a Ph.D. in New Testament Greek. In 1942, he helped found an innovative interracial community that they called Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. Through the years, they endured much harassment, threats, and attacks. To help the community economically, he wrote the Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament, a translation that set the whole story of Jesus and the early church in the then contemporary rural south. Jerusalem was Atlanta. Rome was now Washington DC.

One day, Jordan was visiting with a minister in a less controversial church. The man gave Jordan a tour of the building. The minister showed him the lovely stained glass and beautifully designed sanctuary. Then they stepped outside and the minister lifted his arm and pointed to the huge cross atop the steeple. "That cross alone cost well over \$10,000," he said. "You got cheated!" Jordan declared. "Times were when Christians could get them for free." (adapted from MinistryMatters.com).

Christians can still get crosses for free—just not the kind you put on buildings.

Some of the resources and the challenges for our life of faith during Lent, and during any hard time in our lives, can be found in Psalm 27. The obvious resource is God—"The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Should I fear anyone?

The Lord is a fortress protecting my life.

Should I be frightened of anything?" (vs. 1-2)

The God we can depend upon is always greater, always more powerful, than anything that can frighten us—even armies camped against us. The Psalmist knows that God "will shelter me in his own dwelling during troubling times;

he will hide me in a secret place in his own tent;

alone, out in the open. God protects us. Even then, though, there are times that life can be overwhelming and frightening, and we cry out like a child in the night, trusting that God will come and sit by us and hold our hand. The psalmist is able to say, "I have sure faith that I will experience the Lord's goodness," and tells others that they can "hope in the Lord."

Our Gospel lessons the last few weeks have been hop-skipping around, from the Transfiguration, back to the Temptations, which we would have covered last Sunday, weather notwithstanding.

And now we're on the road to Jerusalem, that road the disciples didn't want to walk—the road that would lead Jesus to the Cross. From this road, there would be no turning back.

It wasn't a straight trip to Jerusalem. Jesus and the disciples would spend time in different towns and settlements. Jesus would preach of the coming Kingdom of God, and he wouldn't just talk about it, he would live as if it were here right then. He would bring love where there had been fear and anger. He would bring healing where there had been illness. He would bring release for those imprisoned by demons or sin. He would bring sight to those who were blind, physically or spiritually. But still, Jerusalem was his destination.

In our Gospel passage today, we have a warning and a lament. Some Pharisees give Jesus a friendly warning—"Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." Often we consider the Pharisees as Jesus' enemies. This wasn't always the case. The Pharisees were a group who were trying to bring religious renewal to Judaism, which was similar to what Jesus was preaching. But the Pharisees wanted to bring renewal by having people follow the Law strictly, for obedience to the Law was what God wanted. Most of the Pharisees were lay people, not priests, but they accepted the stricter laws of the priesthood for their own lives. Jesus, on the other hand, wanted an inward renewal, and didn't feel that the letter of the law had to be applied in all situations. This difference caused tension and conflict, but some Pharisees were open to Jesus. Despite their different ways of teaching, both Jesus and the Pharisees didn't much like the Roman-imposed secular government. Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, was a governor of Galilee, Jesus' home province. He was the one who got suckered into having John the Baptist beheaded after Salome's dance. It wouldn't be surprising if Herod Antipas was turning his attention to Jesus—all these little religious movements had the potential of boiling over into politics, and if the Romans thought that there was too much unrest, his rule might come crashing to an end and Roman legions sent in to quiet things down.

Jesus answered, "Tell that fox"—and that was an insulting term among the Jews for a destructive varmint, like calling him a rat or weasel—"Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." That didn't mean that Jesus would keep at it two more days and then leave, but that in the present and the near future, he would keep on with his ministry there, undeterred by threats or intimidation.

Where was he going next? Jerusalem. His talk about a first day, a second and a third, hints at his death and resurrection to come. Although Jesus' ministry up to this point had been in Galilee, Jerusalem was the focus of what was to come. It was the site of the Temple, but also the center of political power and intrigue. And, Jesus knew, it was the place where prophets were unwelcome and sometimes killed. Jesus knew that the city and nation were heading on the path to destruction, and that caused him grief. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Barbara Brown Taylor writes in *The Christian Century*, 1995: "this is the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed." We, as the church, are called to take this posture, to offer compassion, protection, and hope to those who are suffering and in danger from "foxes" like Herod in the text. He wanted to protect the people, to nurture them, to save them, with the urgency of a mother protecting her children from attack." (unquote) This week and next, we're lifting up our Week of Compassion offering. Like Jesus wanting to protect and save Jerusalem, we're called upon to protect and save the weak, the hurting, the dispossessed all around the world.

Jesus wanted to protect the children of Israel, the children of Jerusalem, like a hen protecting its chicks, or like a human mother protecting her children from an attack, or like a teacher at a school trying to protect students from a shooter. The love of Jesus, the love of God, could save the city, the nation, and bring it to the paths of peace. But that was not to be. Eventually the Jews would rise up in rebellion against Rome, and the Roman army would ruthlessly impose the force of their great army. Jerusalem would be left in shambles, and the Temple, the seat of their worship, would be torn down. Jesus foresaw the terrible times that would come because his people would not learn the paths of peace. Jesus lamented, "If only...If only." Still today, in a world beset by violence, by warfare, by terrorism, by senseless killing, Jesus laments. "If only...If only..."

These words of Jesus were a prophecy of things to come a generation later, and also a look back to Jerusalem's constant rejection of the prophets, which was also a constant rejection of God.

Debra Mumford reflected on Jesus' mission in these words: "Jesus knew that in order to fulfill the will of God, he could not veer from the path that was set before him. He had to complete his work and then go to Jerusalem to suffer his fate. The Pharisees' warning about Herod presented Jesus with an opportunity to back away from his destiny. Rather than back away, though, Jesus leaned more fully into it."<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

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<sup>1</sup> Debra Mumford, Homiletical Perspective on Luke 13:31-35, in *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 2*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 53.

Jesus leaned more fully into his mission, his destiny, and didn't turn back. His disciples followed, uncertain, fearful, and anxious. Sometimes when life throws challenges in our way, when we feel pressured to give in or give up, we can identify with those disciples. Faith, loyalty, and living out God's purpose don't come easily. But still, Jesus invites us to follow the path of discipleship, and to trust in him.

Or, as the song we are about to sing says, "I have decided to follow Jesus—no turning back, no turning back." Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon

