

“I MUST BE ON MY WAY”

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, February 21, 2016 – Lent II
Higganum (9:00 a.m.) and Haddam (10:30 a.m.) Congregational Churches
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*

Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own offspring shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “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.’ 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.’”

"I have decided to follow Jesus/I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus/No turning back, no turning back."

"When my friends and I sang this song at church camp," writes Jennifer M. Ginn, "we sang sincerely, often teary-eyed, seated on the ground with the cross illuminated by candlelight in front of us. In those emotional moments, I imagined myself to be standing firm in the Lord as the Philippians were urged to do by Paul, who reminds them, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." In those moments, I was determined to set my face toward him. But my single-mindedness never lasted. It was mostly the allure of gossip or [the awareness of] boys that sidetracked my determination then. I stopped so often along the way of following that I lost my way. Occasional flashbacks to those times and to the words of that song turned my attention to Jesus, but I have moved in fits and starts through adolescence and adulthood—sometimes toward, and often away from, singleness of purpose."¹

Singleness of purpose, purity of heart, full-bodied devotion: these words convey a spiritual ideal toward which we all strive, but which we rarely achieve. We are not alone in this, of course. Sarah and Abraham, the mother and father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, struggled for years to find their singleness of purpose by trusting in God's threefold promise of land, descendants, and blessing. Sarah in her old age even laughed at this promise.

Many were those in the first century who decided to follow Jesus, yet frequently fell short of singleness of purpose, for any number of reasons. The rich young man who couldn't give up his many possessions in order to follow Jesus. That inner circle of disciples who followed Jesus all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, yet fled from the scene of the crucifixion. Judas who betrayed him. Peter who denied him.

Here is how the gospel of Luke describes Jesus' singleness of purpose: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). "Taken up" is a reference to the crucifixion. "Set his face" implies determination, steadfastness.

Many years ago, when I was fan of the Boston Celtics, one of my favorite players was Robert Parish. When Robert Parish was on the basketball court, the expression on his face rarely changed. He had on his game face. The set of his face showed that his singleness of purpose was always to play basketball to the best of his ability.

We could say, then, that Jesus had on his game face when he began his final journey to Jerusalem. But he didn't just stride toward Jerusalem without stopping along the way. He stopped many times along the way—to teach, to heal, to hang out with his friends. In today's text, when the Pharisees told him that Herod wanted to kill him, he paused for a moment, and replied to the Pharisees, "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

¹Jennifer M Ginn, "No Turning Back," *The Christian Century* (February 24, 2004), 21. Accessed online.

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.”

When Jesus says “I must be on my way,” this is yet another sign of setting his face to go to Jerusalem. He is determined to go to Jerusalem. He knows what awaits him in Jerusalem: a similar fate to that of prophets before him. There is a growing sense of inevitability in this journey to Jerusalem.

Barbara Brown Taylor has observed that Jerusalem is “the place where God is betrayed by those who hate the good and love what is evil (Mic. 3:2). Nothing that happens in Jerusalem is insignificant. When Jerusalem obeys God, the world spins peacefully on its axis. When Jerusalem ignores God, the whole planet wobbles.”²

The story of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem is a story that is ultimately redeemed by Jesus' resurrection—when Good Friday is overcome by Easter Sunday—but it is nonetheless a story of a grave injustice. It is a story of the suffering and death of an innocent Jewish peasant from the backwater province of Galilee. It is a narrative that evokes our tears and our grief, a story in which we feel the earth unsteady under our feet.

When I was a child in Sunday school in Congregational churches in the 1950's, I read a book about Jesus with the title *The King Nobody Wanted*. The title and the theme of that book made a profound impression on me, more so than the Bible did in those days. The book offered me a compelling portrayal of the humanity of Jesus—of this good person who was misunderstood by many of his contemporaries, and ultimately rejected by nearly all of them.

During this time in my childhood, I often struggled with feeling lonely and misunderstood, and I think I found comfort in knowing that Jesus had felt the same way. For example, when the author of this book retold the story where Jesus called Herod a fox, he commented that “Jesus saw that there were not many of the people who understood his message or knew who he was. A few believed in him, but others soon lost interest in him, if they ever cared at all. Only once in a long while did he see any results from all his work.”³ A few chapters later, referring to Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, the author commented that “Jesus was growing lonelier every day, and the hardest task was still ahead.”⁴

The “hardest task” that “was still ahead” for Jesus in Jerusalem was his crucifixion. Although the gospels don't all have the same chronology for Jesus' public ministry, and they don't all tell the same stories about Jesus or retell the same stories that Jesus told, they are all in agreement about the inevitability of Jesus' suffering and death. Once Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” there was no turning back.

On this journey from which there was no turning back, Jesus became the focal point for what we might call a nonviolent subversive insurrection. What I mean by “subversive insurrection” is Jesus' singleness of purpose in proclaiming the imminent arrival of the empire of God.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, “As a Hen Gathers Her Brood,” *The Christian Century* (February 25, 1998), 201. Accessed online.

³Norman F. Langford, *The King Nobody Wanted*, 104.

⁴*Ibid.*, 143.

Unlike those of his contemporaries who hoped that the empire of God would violently overthrow the empire of Caesar, Jesus seems to have believed that the establishment of the empire of God would steadily undermine the empire of Caesar and subvert the power of all those who helped to keep the Roman empire in place.

Jesus' singleness of purpose in leading this nonviolent insurrection led him, inevitably it seems, to the violence of crucifixion. Both the religious establishment and the occupying power were troubled by Jesus' popularity. They didn't care whether Jesus' intentions were violent overthrow or nonviolent subversion. They saw that his popularity was a threat to their privilege and their power. They came to believe that putting him to death was the only way of putting an end to the movement he was leading.

The arrest and execution of Jesus had the desired result for the chief priests and the Roman governor. The people who had shouted "Hosanna!" on Palm Sunday were shouting "Crucify him!" on Good Friday. When Jesus drew his last breath, so did his subversive insurrection. No doubt the chief priests and the Roman governor breathed a collective sigh of relief. End of story.

Except, as we know, Jesus' crucifixion was not the end of the story. True, it was the end of one kind of story. But it was also the beginning of another kind of story.

In the first kind of story, Jesus' death as a ritual sacrifice meant that he was not who he claimed to be. He was not the promised Messiah. Capital punishment demonstrated this beyond a shadow of a doubt. Jesus was punished for his leadership of a subversive insurrection. His public execution served as a deterrent to any who might think of leading either a violent or a nonviolent insurrection.

What subsequently happened, as we know, was that some of Jesus' followers encountered him alive again after his crucifixion. These encounters led them to believe that God had in fact raised Jesus from the dead. In this second kind of story, Jesus' resurrection was God's definitive "Yes!" to everything that Jesus was about. In the words of Paul's Letter to the Romans, Jesus was "declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4 NRSV).

Not only was Jesus raised from the dead. So also was his subversive insurrection. The same disciples who had fled from the cross on Good Friday came back together on hearing the good news of Easter morning. They became the heart and soul of the way of Jesus, a way that for two millennia has continued to attract followers.

I began this message with a verse from a song about following Jesus. You can find a video of this song on YouTube, and you can follow the camera as it shows the faces of ordinary people singing this song sincerely, emotionally, sometimes teary-eyed. Deciding to follow Jesus is a choice of the heart as well as the head. May our Lenten journey with Jesus be one not only of the mind but also of the heart, as we sing together, No turning back, No turning back.