

Sermon for Lent II (C)
Christ Church, Andover
February 28, 2010

Texts: [Psalm 27](#); [Luke 13:31-35](#)

Friday night I went in to Boston to a benefit concert for Haiti at St. Paul's Cathedral. A group of musicians had gotten together just to "do something" for Haiti. They didn't know what else they could do, so they did what they do – they got together and played music. They sang. They brought people together. They prayed. They let themselves and all of us who joined them feel some of Haiti's pain. The performers ranged all the way from a youthful, sort of edgy folk worship style, to a mostly older Creole-speaking Haitian choir from the Church of the Holy Spirit in Mattapan. It was a gathering of young and old and all of us in between, black, brown, yellow, white – all sharing a deeply human experience together, allowing our hearts to be broken open. I knew from the very first song, performed by two young Haitian men, that I would be experiencing Haiti's tragedy at a different level than I had until now. One of them had lost a brother in the earthquake. Their beautiful piano and vocal duet left a stream of tears running down my cheeks. For a brief moment in time, we were all Haitians.

All of that, of course, was before waking up Saturday morning to learn of the 8.8 magnitude earthquake in Chile, and having to face yet another devastating catastrophe in a neighboring country to the south.

Add all these tectonics and tsunamis on top of a recession, people still losing homes and jobs, two wars underway, and the threat of terrorism, and it can all begin to feel a bit, well, overwhelming. We live in strange times, and it's easy for any of us to feel vulnerable. And when we are vulnerable, it's easy for us to feel paralyzed, perhaps even hopeless at times, in the face of things that threaten not only our well-being but our very existence.

What do we do in the face of it all?

As Jesus began his journey toward Jerusalem, we see *him* coming under the cloud of increasing vulnerability and threat. In our gospel today some Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” They were talking about Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Biblical scholars disagree over whether this was a real threat, and some sympathetic Pharisees were actually trying to *protect* him, or whether these Pharisees were actually trying to scare him and drive him and his followers underground. In that case, Jesus might have been calling their bluff when he then said, “You go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen...!’” And he began to enumerate exactly what he was up to, and how long he would be.

But if this was a *real* threat, and most agree that it was, we see a picture of an absolutely *fearless* Jesus. Here he was, facing an existential threat – from a ruthless potentate who had just taken John the Baptist’s life in the most brutal way. And there was no reason to believe he would not do the same to Jesus. And so, in this situation, Jesus’ response almost defies description! He tells these Pharisees to send Herod back a message in the most defiant tones. Can you imagine doing that? He starts it off with an insult, calling him a fox – a term that in the rabbinical literature of the time was considered to be a term of contempt. Rulers, after all, wished to be thought of as lions, not foxes. And he goes on to tell Herod exactly what he is up to, and how long he will be; and then he proceeds to acknowledge that he will face death as a prophet in Jerusalem. This in itself is a warning to Herod, lest he, like so many of his failed predecessors, should dare to kill one of the prophets.

Jesus’ fearlessness was not reckless, like someone with a sense of self-destructive, maniacal defiance; it came rather from a deep sense of who he was before God, and an absolute sense of confidence in God’s purpose and his place in it. It was a fearlessness born of deep prayer and an intimate relationship with God, such that all other powers are seen as insignificant by comparison.

We then see another aspect to this fierce and fearless Jesus. With the mention of Jerusalem and the prophets, he shows his deep compassion for this city and all that it represents, even as it has so often failed to live up to God’s desire, as he

cries, "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!"

Jesus models for us how to face our own vulnerabilities and threats: with a fearlessness that comes from a deep relationship with God, and with compassion that draws our attention away from ourselves toward others.

Today is the last day of February and the final day of Black History month – and a good time to remember once again a modern day prophet who faced existential threats with grace and with the power of God.

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King preached at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis. He spoke of an incident that took place in New York City ten years earlier. He had been signing books when a deranged woman stabbed him. The blade came close to puncturing his aorta, which would have killed him.

Dr. King talked about other threats to his life. Then he talked about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When the priest and the Levite saw the wounded man lying alongside the road, they asked themselves, "If I STOP to help this man, what will happen to ME?" But the Samaritan came along and asked a different question. He asked himself, "If I DON'T STOP to help this man, what will happen to HIM?"

King went on to acknowledge the threats against his life, but he said that they didn't matter. He said:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not worried about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

After that speech, Dr. King went back to his room at the Lorraine Motel to rest. The next afternoon, he was standing on the balcony of his room when a shot rang out and killed him. But he had done what he had come to do. There was work left to do, but others would do it. Dr. King had set the nation on the right path. That's what he had been called to do. That was the call from which he refused to turn back.¹

We could, of course, bring it even closer to home. I think of people who have gone to Haiti since the earthquake. They could have stayed home in their comfortable homes, but motivated by compassion and the ability to face the threats to their security or well-being with courage, they have gone to do God's work. There were others who had gone to Haiti even before the earthquake, of course. Some of you are familiar with the story of a young woman who was in a hotel when it collapsed. Britney Gengel had gone to Haiti on a humanitarian mission trip to do relief work. She had spent the day feeding the poor when shortly before the earthquake, she called her mother back here in the States to say, "I've found my calling." Until two weeks ago, she was one of the missing, but her body was found and returned to her family for burial. Britney's fearlessness and her compassion make her sacrifice a shining example of how we, too, might learn to face life's daunting challenges and threats.

We might ask some penetrating questions about whether these were all sacrifices worth making. Should the relief workers who died in Haiti have stayed home, instead of risking themselves for other people?

Should Martin Luther King have been satisfied with preaching ordinary sermons in a safe pulpit back home, instead of advocating for sanitation workers in Memphis?

Would Jesus have been better off remaining in Nazareth and working as a carpenter instead of preaching his provocative message about the Kingdom of God?

¹ Dale Kathleen Donovan, notes on Luke 13:31-35 for Lent 2C

To live in fear and the avoidance of all vulnerabilities and threats would not have served any good purpose – either for Jesus or for us. Jesus, traveling on the road to Jerusalem and facing up to Herod, was exactly where he should have been. And Martin Luther King, supporting sanitation workers in Memphis, was exactly where he should have been. And Britney and the relief workers in Haiti, feeding the poor, were exactly where they should have been.

Jesus' response to existential threat is our model: fearlessness and compassion. Consider the challenges we face, individually and as a people. How might God be calling us to find that deeper place of fearlessness, and to live our lives more compassionately?

The Psalmist reflects that deep, intimate confidence in God's purpose in the psalm we sang today:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?

Fearful and selfish lives can never get for us what it is that we ultimately seek, which is the unity with God for which we were created. God calls each and every one of us to lives with deeper purpose – and to find true, eternal life in the process.

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