

“No Turning Back”

Genesis 15:1-12 Psalm 27 Philipians 3:17 – 4:1 Luke 13:31-35

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

I have very fond memories of one of the most significant times I have sung that hymn. I was with a group of men that was surrounded by an even larger group of people. They were all holding candles and they were singing to us; it was an incredible spiritual experience. Some of the people I knew, but many more I had never seen before, but every single one of them had a huge smile on their faces. I was overwhelmed with joy and encouragement, and I felt the power of the Holy Spirit in a very special way.

I really did feel that, as Paul says, that I was a citizen of heaven and I was fully committed to “standing firm in the Lord in this way.” How could anyone feel anything different when you were covered in Holy Ghost goose bumps. It was just over a year later that I had responded to a call into ordained ministry and had sold my business and sold our home and moved my family to rural north Florida to serve a small church in Gadsden County while I commuted to Atlanta, Georgia (275 miles one way) to attend seminary. There were real sacrifices to be made, both for me and even more for my wife and children, but we had the encouragement of the Holy Spirit and the consolation that seminary would not last forever.

About a year after that it was time for me to appear in front of the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. Their meeting was held at the Life Enrichment Center in Leesburg. It was actually the same location that I had been serenaded by the incredible chorus of “I have decided to follow Jesus” just two years earlier, but this occasion was far different. There were no smiling faces. There was no candlelight and no singing at all. There was a circle of clergy who were asking me questions, hard questions, challenging questions, probing questions, all having to do with who I was, my past, my beliefs and convictions, why I felt I was called into ordained ministry. I didn’t feel any Holy Ghost goose bumps at all; in fact, I thought I might break out in hives. It didn’t feel as if it went well at all.

The bottom line was that I was not approved at that time as a United Methodist minister. Their official answer was, “Not yet.” What made matters worse was that a very close friend of mine was interviewed right after me. The answer he received was just plain “No.” Gulp!

It was a long drive back home that day. All kinds of thought swirled around in my head like, “What have I done? Why did I think this was a good idea? How am I going to provide for my family?” There were no guarantees at all.

I am really grateful for that experience. It was very, very precious, even more precious than any Holy Ghost goose bumps I have ever felt. Because it

really was all about faith that there was a God, and somehow, some how that God of love was calling. It was up to me to have faith and to follow where the Spirit led. That leading did not come with any guarantees that it would always be easy or that it would not require sacrifice. That leading did come with the promise of an assurance of God's presence.

We have heard three scriptures about the challenge and the invitation of faith and none of them is easy; each of them has all kinds of complications, but at their heart is a very resolute expression of faith. Faith is at its most potent when it overcomes our fears and our anxieties.

Abraham expresses his fears and reservations to Yahweh. God's promises just don't seem to be working out as God had said they would. Abraham's persistence has been pushed to the limit. Paul expresses concern that the gospel he has proclaimed has been far too watered down by too many who are too concerned, not with the kingdom but with their own well-being. And comfort. Jesus finds himself in a politically charged atmosphere with the Pharisees cleverly attempting to distract him by relaying threats from Herod.

What fears do we have? What anxieties do we have? How does our faith interact with our fears and our anxieties? I am recalling an interesting conversation I had at a class reunion about ten years ago. A classmate I had not seen since graduation posed a very interesting question? He asked us the group that was gathered in a small circle, "When we graduated we all thought that we could conquer the world. So what fears have you conquered over the years and what new ones have you acquired?" How would you answer that question?

There was a big silence. No body rushed to offer a response. We weren't that different from most other people. We weren't that eager to make our private fears public, so each of us kind of waited for someone else to open up first. Hesitantly, but finally some familiar fears were 'fessed up to, including "mice," "being left out or abandoned," and "the dark." Two confessed to being phobics, one claustrophobic and one arachnophobic. Our newer fears were more generational like, "Being doped up and sitting aimlessly in a stupor in a nursing home" or "dying, I just don't like the thought of it" and "a recurrence of my cancer."

I thought about the three dimensions of anxiety described by Paul Tillich, and how the eight of us had covered all three in our revelations. Tillich said that all human beings must in some shape or form confront the anxiety of nonbeing (death), the anxiety of meaninglessness (the question of significance) and the anxiety of fate (unpredictability, uncertainty).

Many of us have been enjoying watching the Winter Olympics this week. We have seen some wonderful performances of great courage. We have seen some great competition with "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" like they used to say on the Wide World of Sports. I noticed a headline about fear on CNN. It said "Fear prompts bobsledder to quit Olympics." The article told about the pilot of the #1 four man bobsledding team from the Netherlands.

He had competed in the two man competition and had crashed on their first test run and although he completed that competition he never felt the confidence he felt he needed. It didn't help that another competitor had already

died on that track. It didn't help either that on the first day of training that eight other sleds had crashed. It didn't help that his wife was very concerned. It didn't help either that his coach tried to cajole him by saying that if he stepped down it would be a decision he would regret for the rest of his life. That seems more than a little harsh to me, but in his statement the pilot blamed no one else, not even the track itself. He took the responsibility on himself just saying that he lacked the confidence at the moment.

In anxious times I have always thought of a verse from Hebrews 2:18, "Because Christ himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Our LORD Jesus never stands in judgement over us. The Psalmist, especially in today's psalm gives us a voice of faith when we are tested by fear and anxiety, "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?" These verses are just two of over 300 references to fear and anxiety in the Old and New Testament. I think it is significant that nowhere in scripture is there an appeal to simplistic platitudes.

The psalms don't say things like, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going. The psalms refuse to make light of impending danger by urging everyone who is afraid to "make lemons out of lemonade." Neither do the psalms project a pseudo image of confronting threats with a display of "the right kind of stuff" that some have and others don't.

No, the strength articulated in the psalms is a humble type of courage,

For he will hide me in his shelter

In the day of trouble;

He will conceal me under the cover of his tent,

He will set me high upon a rock. (Ps 27:5)

There is a humility here that can withstand the most severe circumstances with confidence in God.

Fear and anxiety are also a kind of wake-up call. They can have the effect of putting us on high alert. That can be a very positive benefit. We know a bit about this these days. There is a very particular biology of fear that is centered in a part of the lower, most primitive part of our brain. It is called the amygdala. This small structure scouts for trouble and when it detects it, an alarm is sounded and jerks multiple neural cords. It is geared to reacting quickly to the threat; its strength is rapid processing; it ignores fine distinctions and readily uses generalizations. It can get things done quickly and has a very quick reaction, but it has significant weaknesses as well.

There is a dangerous lack of precision. With prolonged fear there is a substance called noradrenalin that is flushed throughout the body. At first it produces intense vigilance, but then it so floods the brain that one's attention loses the capacity to focus on anything other than the object of fear. When fear and anxiety become our chief mode of being, we lose the capacity to focus attention elsewhere, so tunnel vision occurs and fear and anxiety take over. And with that paralysis begins to set in.

With that paralysis, comes a loss of imagination and creativity and compassion. We become locked into concern for the dangers of the present and lose the ability to envision any greater reality than what is happening right now.

Rabbi Abraham Heshel has claimed that the role of the prophet is “to cast out fear.” I John says a very similar thing. “Perfect love casts out fear.” This is why cultivating a sense of beauty is important in a very practical way. It is why expressing compassion is even more important, and this is why keeping creativity and compassion interacting with each other is very healthy. The psalmist does this using poetry in the service of prophecy, showing a faithful way to parlay fear into the energy of faith and to transmute danger into possibility. The psalmist says, I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” Even though present circumstances appear to deny God’s goodness, he trusts that which is not seen. God is the object of his faith, “the LORD will take me up.” This assurance is the heart of the gospel. God will not let his promises return empty. In Christ all things will become new. In some circles it has become fashionable to ridicule hope, but the poetry of the psalmist moves us from the anxiety of the moment to a wider view of the future with firm confidence in the LORD,

Wait for the LORD;

Be strong, and let your heart take courage;

Yea, wait for the LORD! (Psalm 27:14)

Jesus was in the middle of all kinds of political intrigue. There is nothing to lead us to believe that the Pharisees had any kind of pure motives for warning him that Herod was out to kill him. Jesus was not naïve about the dangers he faced but neither did he focus on them. He was so fully enmeshed in the source of all real love that he could be faithful to his calling of the moment to cast out demons and heal the sick. He ministered to those on the margins with full awareness of the scorn and violence that Jerusalem holds in store for him, but notice this, he does not return that hateful rage with rage of his own. Jesus does not launch into an incendiary diatribe, quite the contrary, his response is a motherly lament, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wing, but you were not willing.” That evokes an eloquent image of God’s maternal desires; it is tempting to romanticize it into just another “aaaahhhhhh” moment.

There was a professor who spent a year teaching in Tanzania in Africa. He writes about that experience, “During my time teaching in Tanzania, I passed by the chicken house on the way to and from the campus where I taught. Regularly, mother hens had new broods of downy chicks that stayed close as they pecked around in the grass. At night, one by one, they climbed under her breast, and you could see nothing but the hen on guard, her chicks lost somewhere under her feathers. When a fox occasionally attacked at night, she could not run away. Not a mother hen! She bared her breast and the fox took her first. In the morning, there was nothing but clusters of feathers here and there, and little chicks running around on their own.”

He continues, “The mother hen represents a new expression of power and leadership, the one for others, the servant leader, the one whose extravagant

love considers the welfare of the most vulnerable first. Thus the means of survival over against the attack of the wily foxes of this world is provided not by retaliation or brute force, but by gathering the innocent, the weakest, the most vulnerable into a community in which the love of the mother hen lives on even after her death!"

That's what we sing every Sunday, "Because she lives, I can face tomorrow.!"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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February 28, 2010
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto