



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE LENTEN JOURNEY”

Scripture Lessons: Mark 10:32-34

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, February 21, 2010.

Lent is a forty day journey, excluding Sundays, that begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on Easter morning. It is a journey on which we follow Jesus as his disciples up a dusty path toward Jerusalem and Calvary and eventually an empty tomb in a garden. This journey commences while the dark and dreary days of winter are still with us and reaches its glorious destiny when the new life of spring is bursting forth in all of its glory. It is a journey that begins in the ashes and concludes with lilies. It is a journey on which we are not simply tourists, traveling for pleasure or rest, entertainment or personal edification, but rather we are pilgrims journeying with others towards a destination or better yet a destiny, that will bring us to a better place of permanence and purpose.

Inevitably when the Lenten journey begins both a memory and an image come to mind for me. The memory comes from my school days in Mississippi when our sophomore English teacher, Eunice Hart, would require us to recite from memory the prologue from Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales". As some of you must remember as well, it begins in those famous lines from the 14th Century that some of us had to recite in the Middle English:

“Whan that April with its showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every weine in swich liquor
Of which vertu engendered is the flowr.”

Basically Chaucer is saying that when spring returns to the Earth with its soft showers, when the young sun and gentle winds awaken new life in man and nature and the days themselves begin to lengthen, then it is according to Chaucer “longen folk to go on pilgrimages.”

But if Chaucer provides me with the memory for this season the gospels provides me with the image. Mark describes this image as follows:

- 32 They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him,
33 saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles;
34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10:32-34, p. 823)

This morning I would invite you to join with me as we take our place among the disciples following their Lord up to the threatening city of Jerusalem, where the prophets were often stoned to death. Earlier we were told that Jesus had “set his face to go to Jerusalem” and this is the third time that Jesus tells his

disciples what they can expect upon their arrival. I want us to focus just on verse 32 and I want you to imagine with me what it would be like to be in that company behind our Lord. What do you think they were thinking and feeling?

It is not really a very pleasant or scenic trip to go from Galilee to Jerusalem. To get there you have to turn your back on the lovely lake of Galilee with its still waters reflecting the tumbling green hills and the spreading trees at the water's edge. Around the lake during spring time there is a carpet of colored flowers which Jesus said on one occasion "excelled Solomon in all his glory." To get to Jerusalem from Galilee you have to take the long winding path southward to the hills of Judea, and finally you must climb slowly up the bare and forbidding mountains which surround the ancient city, a city ancient even in our Lord's day. And though one must travel from North to South to get to Jerusalem from Galilee the Bible always speaks of "going up to Jerusalem" because of its much higher elevation. At any rate, going from Galilee to Jerusalem would be like going from an oasis to a desert. Along the way you leave behind you the green grass, and the verdant hills and you come to the dusty, barren ground of Judea strewn with big boulders. Galilee becomes only a faint memory and there is no more soft water or arching trees, just a hard path among the rocks beneath an empty sky.

"They were on the road going up to Jerusalem."

Do you realize that this scene marks a turning point in the gospel of Mark and in the life of our Lord? Jesus will never again see Galilee prior to his death, nor will he experience the joys that he had known there. Gone forever are the happy crowds and the quiet walks along the beach. Gone are the fishing expeditions with his friends and the nights spent in deep communion beneath the Galilean stars. Gone are the swelling crowds that followed Jesus gladly hung on his every word. Galilee is gone for Jesus has set his face and now he must finish the work that he had come to do.

I invite you today to think with me about these two locales Galilee and Jerusalem, and what they represent you perhaps can identify. Galilee is synonymous with home, with friends, with the beauty of hills and lake, with a growing movement and a responsive crowd, with all the marks of success. But Jerusalem? It is a frowning city set amid desolate hills. It represents the threatening power of Pharisee and Sadducee. It contains a huge, unreliable and strange crowd of people from different places, all there to celebrate the Passover. Jerusalem is symbolic of loneliness, betrayal, danger, agony, and the lurking cruelty of Rome. And yet, both of these places belong to the ministry of Jesus and to our ministry as well. There is always an element of Galilee and an element of Jerusalem in the life of faith, but the season of Lent forces us to consider Jerusalem.

Yes, I said forces because most of us would omit the Jerusalem part of our pilgrimage if we could. For the most part contemporary Christians have developed a Galilee kind of religion, and despite how valuable it may be it is only a part of Christianity. But if we joined the disciples who are making their way up to Jerusalem we may see some of those deeper elements of our faith who symbols are not sunshine, placid waters and success, but rather a friend's kiss of betrayal, a crown of thorns, and a cross.

"They were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid."

These are uncomfortable words, which shouldn't surprise us because you often run across uncomfortable words within scripture. We can't avoid them. The Bible speaks of both comfort and discomfort, of joy and sorrow, of life and death, of blessing and sacrifice. There are times when Jesus opens wide his arms to receive and comfort those who are of a child-like spirit. But there are other times, and this is one of them, when the picture is quite different --- when Jesus stands before us or walks ahead of us with a determination and a conviction that has few parallels in our puny lives. There is a greater distance

between Jesus and us then just a few feet of space allows. He has a courage and a confidence and a commitment that shatters all of our pretensions to faithfulness and brings us to our knees.

It is this Jesus who comes to us in Lent and he walks ahead of us up the road. It is this Jesus who reminds us that the Christian life is not all sunshine and roses but may even require suffering and sacrifice.

Can you see him up there ahead of us on the road, walking with determination up this rocky path on a spring morning? Maybe we see a cross or two on the horizon left over from some previous crucifixion. The disciples following in groups of two or three, exchanging frightening glances, stumbling forward, tired and troubled, and as our text tells us today “amazed and afraid.”

Yes, they and we are amazed by this Jesus. For them and for us there is a great deal of awe and wonder surrounding this Galilean we follow. During Lent we quite properly spend some time trying to understand the life of Christ and the meaning of his passion. But frankly, we will never get to the point where we fully or finally comprehend. We preachers and teachers may be guilty of saying too much and explaining too much or giving the impression that we really have figured out this Jesus of Nazareth. But I remain convinced that despite the depth of our conviction, despite the extent of our biblical knowledge or theological insight, despite the clarity of our language or the persuasiveness of our speech, we will never be able to fully explain the person and the work of our Lord. And if we scale down the figure of Jesus to fit our tiny minds, then in the process something of his glory fades and the mystery and awe of his being are jeopardized.

It may well be that we inhabitants of the 21st century have a decreased capacity for amazement. Unlike those first disciples we live in a scientific, enlightened, and technologically advanced age. It takes a lot to amaze us. We have smart phones and smart bombs that can be guided down the airshaft of a building. We can watch and communicate with people on the other side of the globe instantly. We can send people and machines back and forth into space and transplant human organs with astonishing success. We have tiny robots the size of a grain of sand that can be inserted into the body and do repair work. So there is very little that leaves us amazed and awe struck anymore. And we are the poorer for it.

And how is it with our sense of wonder as we follow Jesus up the path to Jerusalem? Are we casual and analytical as we journey through this Lenten season? Do we stand before Jesus confident that modern scholarship has placed him in his historical niche and that his teachings have been easily arranged and interpreted even issued in digest form. Or instead do we kneel before him in awe and amazement and confess with Peter that “you are the Christ, the son of the Living God.”

“And Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.”

Did you hear that? It is not just amazement but also fear that characterizes the followers of Jesus. What are we to make of the fear of those first disciples? Were they just plain frightened, just scared to death as anyone would be at the thought of unknown dangers ahead? Maybe this was it. Maybe they feared that they, like their master before them they were walking into the jaws of death, proceeding with reckless abandon into that city so famous for its persecution of the prophets. Maybe they knew that the fate he predicted for himself would be theirs as well --- condemnation, mockery, abuse, and death. This kind of fear is understandable and even appropriate. This kind of fear releases adrenaline into the bloodstream and sharpens the senses. This is the kind of healthy fear that a soldier has as he prepares for battle. A soldier who has not genuine sense of fear in the face of real or perceived danger is lacking good sense or appropriate caution. So if this is the kind of fear that Mark describes then it is certainly appropriate.

But there is also a fear that is born of lack of courage or faith --- a cowardice, if you will, that prevents people from ever reaching their potential simply because they don't have the courage to try or else fear that they will fail. Fear of this sort is inappropriate because it can prevent us from being what we could be or doing what we ought to do.

This image in my mind of Jesus walking up the road ahead of us is a reminder that Jesus not only consented to become like us but he also invites us to become like him. In fact, we are made to be like him. But occasionally our fears prevent us from even trying. We wonder if it is really possible to live as he lived, to love as he loved, to forgive as he forgave, to serve as he served.

"Take up your cross and follow me," he said. He also said, "The one who believes in me will do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." I don't know about you, but I can understand the fear on the part of the reluctant disciples. I feel that same fear on occasions. There are times when I fear that I can not measure up to his purity, his love, his determination to be and to do what he was convinced was his calling. Sometimes the figure of Jesus walking ahead of me up the road sends a shudder through my soul and instills a holy fear within my heart. And so it is that the figure of Jesus walking ahead of us toward Jerusalem and the cross is a haunting one. It calls into question and exposes everything that is false or fearful or phony about my own discipleship.

And yet, this recurring image of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem is also a source of comfort and inspiration. And do you know why that is so? Listen: **"They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid."** Did you hear the message of comfort and encouragement? You see the glorious thing in this image is that in spite of their reluctance, in spite of their hesitancy, in spite of their amazement and their fears the disciples still followed! God gave them the grace to follow, even if it was at something of a distance. The truth is that we will never quite catch up to Jesus. Because of our crippling sins and paralyzing fears he always walks ahead of us. He is forever beyond our grasp but he looks back over his shoulder in love and beckons us to follow and not to be fearful.

It is this same Jesus whom we call the Christ who in all the wonder of his being, in all the mystery of his journey to Jerusalem, in all the boldness of his passion, who looks back on you and me as he did on those ordinary disciples in his own day and says, "Follow me".

And this, my friends, is the primary decision of Lent. No, this is the primary decision of life. Will we follow? Will we continue our journey with him despite our reluctance? If we are willing to follow then we are simply saying: "Lord Jesus, no matter where it is --- beneath the starlit skies of Galilee or the threatening skies of Jerusalem; and whenever it is --- when I am feeling prayerful and intimate with you or when I am feeling cold and uninspired; and however it is, whether it be through laughter or tears, through life or death, through victory or defeat. Wherever, whenever and however, Lord, I will follow you." And once that decision is made in this difficult and threatening world, all of the resources of God's grace will be at our disposal.

Prayer:

How nice it would be, O Lord, to remain forever in Galilee, walking with you on the beach, communing beneath the stars, sharing in prayer and fellowship. But remind us that Jerusalem is a part of our pilgrimage as well, even as it was a part of yours, and that each of us must walk there as well. Jerusalem will be there when our discipleship becomes more demanding than enjoyable. Jerusalem will be there when we are called to be servants rather than to be served. And we would ask today that you would not provide us with a detour around Jerusalem, but that rather that you would simply equip us by your grace to follow where you lead, and that you will provide us strength for the journey, for it is in your name that we pray. Amen.