

Sermon – “Heroic Deliverance”

Sunday, May 7, 2017

Scripture Readings: Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10

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Today’s first reading tells of the early moments of the church, when the Gospel was spreading rapidly through the Spirit working in the deeds of the first Christians. Hear these words from Acts 2, verses 42 through 47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Our Gospel reading relates words of Jesus in teaching the people around him. Listen for God’s word to you from the book of John, chapter 10, verses 1 through 10.

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

This weekend most of our proclamation of the Word comes from our children, as they share with us their spring musical, *Heroes of the Faith*, a tale of children visiting a museum and encountering the tales of four of the heroes of the Bible: David, first known to us as the young man who slayed Goliath, and later as the great king of a unified Israel; Deborah, a woman prophet and judge of Israel from the pre-monarchy times, who led the people in a victorious military campaign against an oppressor; Elijah, one of the great prophets of Israelite history; and Moses, who led the whole people of Israel, first out of slavery in Egypt, and then through their 40-year wilderness journey.

So for my part, I will just offer a brief reflection on heroism.

Those of us who grew up in Sunday School—and maybe even some of us who didn't—likely remember some of those children's tales of the great heroes of God. Not just Moses, Deborah, David, and Elijah, but Noah, Abraham, Daniel, Esther, Mary, Peter, John, Paul, Stephen, and others...not to mention of course Jesus, but he's sort of in a class all by himself.

Maybe you still have some long-ago Vacation Bible School songs about these people in your head. Perhaps you recall the imagery, the narratives—who could forget the young David facing down the Philistine giant? Or Moses, arguing with the hard-hearted Pharaoh. Maybe you can still see the felt board versions of these characters, and the paper projects complete with cotton-ball covered sheep figures. Or if you're a little younger, you might imagine the Veggie Tale versions.

It is kind of an odd experience the first time you go back as an adult and thoroughly read the biblical depictions of the people you remember from Sunday School. Maybe you've had that experience. I know a few have had it as a part of one of the Disciple bible studies here, but you may well have encountered it in your own personal reading as well.

The main thing you notice is that, well, there are more things than you remember. The story is usually a good deal more complex. Themes and plots appear that you didn't hear of before, or which you didn't recognize or understand the same way as a child. The characters themselves are more complex. They are driven by multiple motives, some of which weren't highlighted in the children's bible versions, and some of which, frankly, make us squeamish. Their behavior is often worrisome.

Sometimes this makes people uncomfortable with the bible itself, then, when they see that the heroic figures of old, those who seem to be celebrated in the bible, are not always entirely good people.

But one thing which we must remember about the bible—and this is one of the things that actually makes it come across to me as ultimately more trustworthy and useful—is that it doesn't ever really whitewash much of anything. It tells things as they are. It is kind of surprising, when you think about it, that the written histories of the Hebrew people never make their beloved heroes and patriarchs look perfect. Somehow, despite being the greatest kings in Israel's history, David and Solomon's flaws didn't get erased from the story. In fact, they are often depicted in surprising detail. Moses often didn't know what he was doing, was frustrating to God, and overstepped in a serious way that got him held back from ever entering the promised land.

When we realize that the people in the bible are flawed, it makes them more realistic and relatable to us mere regular human beings. And when we realize that they are depicted *as* flawed—that is, they are not being held up as examples of what the bible regards as perfection, but as historical examples of how God has worked through immensely imperfect and sinful human beings—then we also come to have a more comfortable relationship with the bible itself.

But if perfection and sinlessness isn't what defines heroism, then, what is?

I would suggest it has to do with actively taking up an important role God has given them, and courageously trusting in God to see it through. We often think of heroes as defined by their own greatness, but biblical heroes are defined by their reliance on God's greatness.

People may be heroes, but God is the deliverer.

Our passage from John has Jesus reminding us there are anti-heroes, too—thieves and bandits who break in to harm, to destroy, who scatter the sheep. But “whoever enters by me,” he says, “will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”¹ Refuge, safety, these are found by reliance on God through faith in Christ. He is warning us of dangers and reassuring us that we can take courage in him. About us, the sheep, Jesus concludes with a promise: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”²

Trust in this promise is what allowed Stephen to heroically witness to the faith as he faced being stoned. It is what led Peter and Paul to carry on and bring the knowledge of the love of God and the salvation of Jesus to the thousands who heard them and came to believe.

And what of us? What are we meant to get out of seeing the stories of heroes? The point is certainly not, in our religion, to worship them, or even, remembering those flaws, to hold them up on too high a pedestal. It might be first in order to recognize God's greatness and active work in them. It might be second because in them we can find an inspiration to heroism ourselves.

We tend to think we can't also be heroes of the faith, that it is based on a certain kind of greatness that we don't have. But it is *God's* greatness, and we *do* have that.

Think of those described in our reading from Acts. “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”³

These aren't kings and mighty people. Most of these people aren't even named. These are simply ordinary people so thoroughly and fully trusting in Christ, and so thoroughly and unreservedly devoted to living out their faith, that they don't hold anything back. They see people in need, they fill the need. They happily share in everything. “They'll know we are Christians by our love,” right? And their joyful life as whole-hearted demonstrators of faithfulness catches the attention, day by day, of more and more people who come to join in this fantastic celebration of fellowship in God.

¹ John 10:9 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² John 10:10 (*NRSV*).

³ Acts 2:42-47 (*NRSV*).

Being a hero does not necessarily mean being someone in a great, pivotal role of authority like Moses or David. It means finding *whatever* your role is, that God has placed before you, and adopting it with faith, courage, and reliance upon God.

You might not be a hero known to the ages by name, with children's musicals written about you.

But you might well be a hero to someone. Your friends. Your church. Your community. Your children. Your parents. Your spouse. The person somewhere in your life whose need you are uniquely positioned to meet, or who knows nobody else willing to help. The person whose hope is shaky and whom you barely even know, but who might just sense something special in the way you live a follower of Jesus Christ who lives with the confidence and integrity that can only come from faith in him, and who might be quietly built up by that without you ever knowing it.

May God give us all the strength to live in faith and the humble discernment to see the heroic purposes God has for us today. Amen.