

“As He Made His Way to Jerusalem”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

March 13, 2022

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He 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. ³³Yet 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.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, 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.’” (Luke 13:31-35)

About a third of the way into his story of Jesus, the evangelist Luke makes a key pivot. From this point on, everything points in one direction. “*When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up,*” Luke writes, “*he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” Even though it will take Jesus ten long chapters to get to that triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, everything that happens from then on out builds suspense and expectation around the key events that will happen – that **must** happen – at Jerusalem. Throughout the rest of Luke’s gospel, Jesus will do the work that we associate with his ministry. He preaches and teaches, he heals, he challenges religious assumptions, and casts out demons. But in Luke’s gospel, the journey to Jerusalem is what it’s all about. Everything hinges on Jerusalem, and in today’s reading, we see Jesus keeping a laser-focused eye on that ultimate destination.

Notably, even Herod’s murderous threats do not throw Jesus off of that focus. People begin warning him, “Hey, you better watch out. Herod is seriously trying to kill you.” And instead of trying to douse that fire, Jesus seems to throw gasoline on it. “*Go and tell that fox that I don’t have time for him. I’ve got more important work to do in Jerusalem.*” The response was a direct insult to Herod. In that culture, the fox was considered a clever creature, but only in a sly, conniving, unprincipled way. A fox was trouble; a fox brought destruction.¹ So, even though Herod was known for terrible violence, it is clear that, to Jesus, Herod was just a sideshow, a minor annoyance, like a gnat buzzing around the ear. Jesus had much bigger fish to fry, and the oil was already beginning to boil in Jerusalem.

Now, I don’t know about you, but that kind of focus seems almost superhuman to me. My own focus can be thrown off by much, much less. Case in point: Arnold Palmer, who used to tell a story about the 1961 Masters to which we can all relate, even if we are not great golfers. Coming down the stretch on Sunday, Palmer had a one-stroke lead. He had just hit a great tee shot on the final hole, and he started feeling pretty good about his chances. All he needed was a par to win. As he approached his ball, sitting up perfectly in the middle of the fairway, he happened to catch sight of an old friend standing in the gallery. The friend waved at Palmer to come over. By instinct, the gregarious Palmer jogged

¹ Leslie J. Hoppe, “Exegetical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (2009), p. 71.



over. “Congratulations,” the friend said as they warmly shook hands. “As soon as I took hold of his hand,” Palmer said, “I knew I had lost my focus.”

He returned to his ball and promptly hit his next shot into a sand trap. The next shot sailed over the green. His chip shot back to the hole went long, and he missed the putt coming back. It was a double bogey – two over par—and it cost him the Masters title. “You don’t forget a mistake like that,” Palmer said later. “But you do learn from it.”²

We all have stories like that, important lessons we have learned the hard way about losing focus, getting distracted, at key moments. Most of us can think of opportunities that we missed, and isolate the point at which things began to slip away, the moment that we look back on and say, “That’s when I lost it.” That’s why this little vignette along Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is so memorable, because I think we are naturally impressed when we see people, even under the most trying of circumstances, maintaining focus and getting the job done. It’s why Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem continues to speak so powerfully to us:

*If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting, or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating, and yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise...
If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it, and—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!*³

One of the greatest examples of this kind of focus took place during the Civil Rights Era in the United States. When two busses left Atlanta bound for Birmingham on May 14, 1961, each bus carried, in addition to the normal array of travelers, a group of six people who were on a momentous mission – people who had bought a ticket for the express purpose of challenging the Jim Crow policies of the South. It was Mother’s Day, and the very first Freedom Riders were headed into Alabama for the first time. Both busses were met with senseless, hate-filled violence. Even so, the riders never hit back. Trained in strategies of non-violence, the riders put their faith in the idea that love is always more powerful than hate, and they never lost that focus.

One of the songs that helped those Freedom Riders maintain that focus – a song that was sung frequently on those bus trips down into the heart of darkness -- was adapted from an older spiritual about workers struggling to keep their hands on the gospel plow ...

*Paul and Silas bound in jail,
Had no money for their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.*

*Paul and Silas thought they were lost,
Dungeon shook and the chains came off,
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.*

² <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/focus.htm>, citing Carol Mann, [The 19th Hole](#), (Longmeadow), quoted in *Reader's Digest*.

³ Rudyard Kipling, “If,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46473/if--->

*Freedom's name is mighty sweet,
And soon we're gonna meet
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on...*

*I'm gonna board that big Greyhound,
Carry the love from town to town,
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.*

In this moment from Luke's gospel, as Jesus pauses along the dusty road to imagine the sight of those ancient gates of Jerusalem, it is clear that he is keeping his eyes on the prize of his life and ministry. Even as Herod spits fire and calls for blood, Jesus brushes off the threats and resets his eyes down the path he must take. "*I must be on my way,*" Jesus says, "because my destiny lies in Jerusalem." And even though Jerusalem was a place that killed honest prophets... even though it was a place where power was too often used for evil instead of good... even as Jesus grieved over the senseless loss and violence in that city... even as Jesus lamented at how few people in that city really believed, how few were really willing to follow God's lead... even then... what we see in Jesus is conviction, laser-focused intent. We see Jesus brushing off the threats and saying "I am on my way to the town where it happens, 'cause it is time to get to work."

Earlier this month, I was blessed to represent Larchmont Avenue Church as visiting clergy for the ordination of our neighborhood friend, Father John Bonicci of St. Augustine and St. John and St. Paul churches. On the orders of Pope Frances, Father Bonicci was elevated to the role of Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of New York. St. Patrick's Cathedral was joyously full on that Mardi Gras Tuesday as Bonicci and another priest, Joseph Espailat of the Bronx, took the oaths of their new office. Bishop Espailat, known by many as the "rapping priest," is now the youngest Catholic bishop in the United States.

As part of the ceremony, each priest is asked to create their own coat of arms to represent them in their work as bishops. A special motto is included in the coat of arms, and I was intrigued by the one that Bishop Espailat chose for his. On a banner at the bottom of his crest are the words "He Knows What He is About." I later learned what those words meant, and why the new bishop chose them to represent his new ministry. The phrase comes from a set of meditations and devotions written by John Henry Newman, a 19th century cardinal from London, England. As a brand-new priest, Bishop Espailat used these words from Newman in the first mass he ever led:

"God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission... Therefore, I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us. [God] does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; **He knows what He is about.** He may take away my friends, He may throw

me among strangers, He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me—still ***He knows what He is about.***"⁴

As Lenten people, as disciples of Christ, I don't think we say that enough as we walk our own journeys. I don't think we get the point of these moments in Christ's journey, when we see him brushing off threats that would cripple most of us, enduring pain that would certainly break all of us, always keeping his eyes on the prize of the salvation of the world. And the thing is, the eyes of Christ are still laser-focused on that prize. His heart is still set on love – love that can cover any hatred, overcome every injustice, erase every misstep and failure and betrayal. God still chooses mercy over vengeance, gentleness over cruelty, healing over violence, every time.

And I believe that Christ is still weeping over the places where evil still seems to be winning out over the good. Christ still reacts with righteous anger when darkness challenges the light. So, you cannot convince me that Jesus is not, even in this moment, weeping over Kyiv, Volnovakha, and the rubble of Mariupol... over the 1.4 million Ukrainian refugees who have fled to Poland. You cannot tell me that the heart of Christ is not breaking right now for every child of God who finds herself trapped under the thumb of a modern-day Herod, a fox whose craftiness seems to breed lies, deception, destruction, and suffering. Make no mistake – the eyes of God are fixed on all of those places. God is on the way to those places even now, and no threat will divert or thwart the goals of the Lord.

As disciples, we are called to learn from this focus... and to set our own sights on those places where suffering exists... here at home, and around the world. As the prayer says, God has created us to do Him some definite service; God has committed some work to each of us which that he has committed to no other. Each of us is called to say, 'I have my mission... Therefore, I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. For even still, He Knows What He is About.'

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

⁴ <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/meditations/meditations9.html>