

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Second Sunday in Lent
Luke 13:31-35

Practice Steadfastness

It is Lent, the time of the year when both the inward journey and the outward journey of our souls are tested. The inward journey is our personal spiritual path towards God; the outward journey is the manifestation of our faith, the way we live in the world. It is Lent, and we are traveling together, once again, with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to new life.

The problem is, in order to get to new life, Jesus has to pass through trials and threats, suffering and death. And it's wishful thinking to imagine that we could get there without some struggle ourselves!

So in these weeks of Lent we are paying attention to the attitudes and habits that scripture tells us Jesus practiced. Last week in the story of the temptations in the wilderness we saw that Jesus resisted temptation by remaining true to his essence. Short cuts to power and easy answers to deep longings were not true to his mission. When faced with those first temptations, he remembered who he was and whose he was. So with his model, we learn to be true to our essence and remember to whom we belong. And we have to practice, practice, practice, because these lessons aren't learned in a day and the temptations to follow our own course are plentiful.

The story of the temptation as told by Luke ends with a cryptic sentence, a foreshadowing of the story to come: *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.* (Luke 4:13) So the careful reader of Luke will ask as the story progresses, *is this the opportune time? Is this the return of temptation, the challenge which might take Jesus "off mission"?*

The threat from Herod might have derailed Jesus. Herod was a pretender to real power—he ruled a small piece of the great Roman Empire, and only because the Romans let him. Yet he had enough say-so in Galilee that he had first imprisoned and later beheaded John the Baptist. He was sly, unpredictable and lacked morals. So the Pharisees, who so often are depicted as Jesus' enemies in the gospels, warn Jesus that Herod was out to get him, too.

Jesus had a choice here. He might have decided to lay low, to go underground for a while with his work. Who would have blamed him? Or he could have gone to another

territory right away, where Herod had no authority. His answer, however, is that he's going to stay in Herod's face, fulfilling his mission. And then when he does get on the road, he's going someplace even more dangerous, a place where he is going to face up to real worldly power, and where he knows he will be rejected by those whom he loves, and killed for being who he is, saying what he says, and doing what he does.

Foolish, some might call him. Couldn't the work of God be better accomplished without all this violence and tragedy?

Did Jesus really need to die on a cross in order for humanity to be saved?

We wrestled with this question in the Feed Your Soul class this past Wednesday. In 45 minutes, there were no answers, just more questions. The "why" of the crucifixion is that somehow his death leads to our salvation. Somehow this became part of God's plan that we would know how deep God's love for us all really is. Somehow this story of Jesus' sacrifice shows us that he is our Savior.

But while we cannot easily answer "why," we can see in the story of Jesus "how." How did he do it? How did he stay on course and fulfill his calling, and how does he show us how to live? I hear his answer in his determined response to the Pharisees' warnings: *Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way.* (Luke 13:33) There will be no distractions for this man on a mission. He is resolute in his conviction, unwavering in his action, and steadfast in his commitment. He's going to Jerusalem, and nothing's going to stop the tide of history from sweeping over them all.

If you've ever walked along an ocean shoreline and watched the waves pound the rocks, you might have noticed how the great seaweeds sway with the current but hold their position day in and day out. They respond to the moment but stand firm, holding fast to their foundation. Once in a while you can find the secret to their steadfastness washed up on shore, the exposed secret which means that plant's life is now over. It's the toughest piece of the entire plant, and it's called, quite simply, the "holdfast." It's not a root-it doesn't absorb nutrients—its sole purpose is to hold fast so that the seaweed can fulfill its mission of growing in one place, despite daily assaults on its stability.

I see Jesus holding fast, standing his ground, living with steadfastness despite daily assaults. I hear Paul counseling the Christians at Philippi to stand fast in their faith, to be loyal to the One who has called them, despite daily opportunities to decide otherwise. And I

feel a compelling call to us today to learn and practice the kind of steadfastness which will keep us on track and help us make the choices God wills for us through our trials and temptations, the kind of steadfastness in life's struggles which strengthens our relationships with one another and with God and shows the world the steadfastness of our Lord.

It takes practice to develop that sort of steadfastness. But life deals most of us many opportunities to practice. A friend of mine faced a serious family health crisis, in which she was the healthy one who steadfastly supported her husband and children, at the center of a network of extended family and friends. She brushed off her strength and devotion with a comment like, "You do what you have to do, you don't have a choice," but what I saw in her was much more than fatalistic acceptance of the situation. "Oh, but you did make a choice here," I pointed out. "You made a choice about your attitude." And the more I've thought about it, the more I see in her a lifetime of choices which have prepared her to live gracefully and courageously through a crisis. Her choices are no different from the ones we all face. She has chosen strong family ties, which sometimes takes hard work, time and energy but which gives her strong support in a crisis. She has chosen faith commitment, so she also has a church community and a relationship with God that gives them all strength and hope. She has chosen to have a sense of humor about life, so even when things are grim, she can still smile. She has chosen to be steadfast when life deals difficulties, to hold fast to the foundation so that she can fulfill her life's purpose in family and faith. And when she feels like she just might lose her grip, she has a community to help her hold on.

There are quiet heroes among us who practice this kind of steadfastness every day. You know them, don't you? Those who care for a family member with special needs day in, day out, because of a commitment made years ago. Those who struggle with their own health issues but who choose not to focus on their disabilities, but on their abilities. Those who advocate for the poor, the weak, the lonely not for reward but because it is their call. Those who are not intimidated by threats, but who say in their actions, *Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way.* This is my life, says the steadfast person. I will do what God has called me to do.

We have opportunities to practice steadfastness as a congregation, too. We don't know how they will present themselves, but it's guaranteed they will arise. One small

congregation had the opportunity when a young man began attending church with his grandparents. Everyone knew who he was—he was the one accused of killing a man while driving drunk. He was the one the town was ready to make into an example, to show that there would be no more tolerance of drinking and driving. And there he was, in church.

The church people had a choice to make—whether to join the moral outrage of the community in condemning this young man, or to find ways to include him in their life. They chose the latter, and before long in addition to weekly worship, he was in a Bible study group with people his parents' or grandparents' age. After a few months he was asking if he might be baptized. Meanwhile, the criminal justice system moved along and the threats to lock him up and throw away the key grew louder and louder. It looked like this “example” might end up being a scapegoat for decades of anger—and guilt--over alcohol abuse. The congregation, who had grown to love him, responded by holding a prayer vigil, by writing letters to the editor and to the judge on the case, and by going to court to stand with him. The tide of public opinion was against them, but they knew that this young man deserved another chance and they were willing to risk the judgment of the community directed at them because of their stance.

They were practicing steadfastness. Strong trust in God and a resolute attitude toward the path God was showing them was theirs. *Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way.*

My friends, the first disciples of Jesus Christ spent the rest of their lives pondering the meaning of his life, the way he lived, the words he spoke and the road he laid before us. The day he chose to ignore the threats of Herod and also identified the bigger threat waiting for him in Jerusalem was a day that stayed in their memories as a sign of his unwavering commitment to his mission. In the early decades of the church there were many threats to the lives and witness of those following Jesus' way. But those first Christians stood firm in their faith, knowing how steadfast their Lord had been.

It takes inner courage for outer strength to be manifest. And it takes outward challenges for inward commitment to be tested. We have spent much time in recent months thinking about outward marks of discipleship—daily prayer, weekly worship, Bible reading, spiritual friendships, service, and giving. But inward depth of faith resides in attitudes and habits of being which are cultivated over years and through life's challenges.

We practice those ways of being when we allow our faith to lead us, when we consciously choose the way Christ shows us. And one aspect of the way he shows us is steadfastness. *Today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way.* This is the way of Jesus. Is it the way of life you choose?

Dear ones, I know from walking with you through some very difficult passages of life that many of you know much more about steadfastness than I do. Maybe you haven't named it before, and that's the gift of this word today. Or maybe you are feeling inadequate to the task, weak and wishy-washy instead of bold and steadfast. Maybe you know yourself to be easily distracted, easily lured away from Christ's way. Maybe the temptations to follow other ways have found many opportune times in your life.

Do not be discouraged. Today we are given the choice to take up the way of Christ, whether for the first or the fifty-first or the five hundred-first time. Today, because God is steadfast in love for us, we can choose to be steadfast in our life for God.

Receive the blessing which Paul gave to the church at Corinth:
Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous and strong. And let all that you do be done in love.