

Firm Resolve

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: Isaiah 50:7; Luke 9:51

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
March 22, 1998

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Lenten focus for this season is *The Human Face of God*: that in Jesus the presence of God, the reality of God was embodied, the Word was made flesh, and in that face we see the face of God. But, not only in Jesus. The only access to God is the human face; it is in the concrete encounter with the other that there is the possibility, the experience of that other that transcends the human relationship.

John, in his first epistle, says no one has seen God, but the one who dwells in love lives in God, and God lives in that one. And so it is in Jesus that the Christian tradition is focused in order that in that human face we would get a clue as to the nature and being of God. God, like Jesus, has that face as revealed in the story that is told. And so, we keep telling the story of Jesus because that is where, in our tradition, we say the eternal and infinite has touched down, so to speak, become tangible, concrete, something we can get hold of, glimpse, focus on. The face of Jesus is the human face of God and, in the human face, the body of Christ, God continues to be manifest.

Jesus, baptized by John the Baptist, obviously a part of that spiritual renewal movement that was inaugurated in John's ministry, an apocalyptic ministry looking for the end of the age, looking for the dramatic intervention of a God from beyond, Jesus in the experience of his baptism, one of those people that felt the claim and the call of God such that the gospel writers tell us he went off into the wilderness to wrestle and to struggle and to determine the implications of that call, the ramifications of that claim.

And he begins his ministry under the influence of John, but as we noted a couple of weeks ago, before long, he's uneasy with that. Jesus is not one who calls down fire and judgment from heaven. As he wrestles and struggles, he finds another model, not in the prophet Malachi, but rather, in the suffering servant, the suffering servant upon whom God's spirit is placed, who is called, who is gentle, who will not crush the bruised and broken reed or snuff out the smoldering candle, but with compassion will nurture the people of God. Jesus finds in the

suffering servant another way to be about the ministry, a ministry now of grace, of good news, of gospel, the proclamation of the kingdom of God being present and the ministry of healing and of liberation of the prisoner.

This was the program he announced in his home synagogue as he began his Galilean ministry, that ministry which was met with some considerable success in Galilee eventually also got its own opposition. John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod and as the whole program developed, there came a point in the ministry of Jesus as we read it in Luke's gospel, a watershed, if you will, or a turning point when Jesus knew that things had to come to a head, that finally he had to bring his message, his ministry, his program to the very heart and center of his own people in Jerusalem, the city of David, City of the temple, city of everything for which the Jewish heart yearned and longed.

There Jesus knew he must finally make his plea and give his appeal. And so, that's the point at which we find in this week he set his face firmly to go to Jerusalem. You probably picked up in the servant's song in Isaiah 50 that the servant said, "I have set my face like a flint," and that was the stuff that was filling the mind and heart of Jesus. That must have been the spiritual food in which he was submerged and, as Luke tells us the story, he picks up that phrase to denote the turning point, the point at which Jesus knows now what he must do, where he must go. He sets his face firmly toward Jerusalem.

It's rather interesting, I think Luke wants to embroider around that firm resolution what Jesus had to be dealing with, what Jesus was and what Jesus would not be. For just a few verses before the announcement of his face set to Jerusalem, we have the disciples arguing about who will be greatest among them, and Jesus has to set a child in their midst because, obviously, they haven't understood yet that that which he is about is not about posturing for position and power. And then, James and John come and they say, "Say, we just shut down a ministry down the road. We told him to fold his tent and fade into the sunset. He didn't do it in our name." And Jesus says, "You don't get it, do you? Those that aren't against us are for us. There is a great work and there is a broad spectrum of ministry that is necessary and you don't shut somebody down because they're not using your formula or using your label."

Then he sets his face, he's on his way now to Jerusalem, and they go through Samaria. Do you remember there was already an indication of a change in Jesus when he came from Judea in the area of John the Baptist and made his move to Galilee: he went through Samaria. Most of the Jews went around Samaria because of the hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews, but Jesus went through Samaria and he engaged a woman at the well in conversation, which raised some eyebrows, and he carried on a ministry there on his way north. Now he's coming back, and he comes through Samaria again and the group is not received. There is hostility. And so, showing that they still haven't gotten it, they

haven't heard the word of Jesus, James and John said, "Would you like us to call down fire from heaven?"

Well, of course, they had good Hebrew models. Elijah did that a couple of times, if you go to I Kings, the first chapter. When they came after him, he just called fire from heaven to zap them out of here. John and James were in the tradition. But, Jesus was breaking tradition. He said, "You don't get it." In a text which is in some manuscripts, but not all, and not in the printed text I read, Jesus said, "You don't know of what spirit you are."

Face firmly set. Identity clarified. Responding to the call, on his way. Firm resolve. Jesus now knew who he was, what he had to do, and the spirit in which he would do it. And the next stop will be Jerusalem and the crisis of his life and ministry.

As we contemplate that, as I think about these Lenten Sundays and the call to discipleship, I recognize that it is a time when in the church we have often laid a heavy load on people. I've done it myself and I've certainly suffered under enough preaching in my lifetime. You take a text like this, after they leave Samaria someone comes up and says, "I'll follow you wherever you go," and Jesus says, "Look, foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, the son of man is not to lay his head. Don't sign up without understanding the implications." Jesus never took anybody under false pretenses. Someone else comes along and Jesus says to him, "Follow me." He said, "Well, I'd love to follow you, but I've got to go bury my father." Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their dead. This is urgent. Proclaim the kingdom of God." Someone else comes along and says, "I'd like to follow you, but I'd like to have a farewell party with my friends and family first," and Jesus says, "You obviously haven't put your hand to the plow, because once you put your hand to the plow, you don't go back."

Now, I've heard those texts preached; I've gone out of church with a heavy load of guilt. I have recognized the stark contrast between my life and the life of Jesus. I have noticed how far short my discipleship falls from the discipleship that is held forth in the gospels, and have hardly been able to wait for Lent to get over again so that we could get to Easter and resurrection and joy and brightness. And, as I think about that, I don't want to add one more sermon like that, I don't want to burden one more congregation one more time with that heavy load during Lent, because, as a matter of fact, the radicality of Jesus' claim and call is clearly set and we sense that. But, as a matter of fact, that's a radicality that cannot fall upon all of us. What would happen if all of us would leave the dead to bury their dead? Is that really what that means? Are we to take that literally? I think if you were with me with the Swartz family, with Bob yesterday, you'd understand that one of the most beautiful moments and anguishing moments is when the family is gathered around one who is dying, the wonderful bonding, the beautiful love, the departure in peace. And I'm supposed to say to somebody you don't have time for that because the kingdom of God is your claim? Well, what is this kingdom of

God, then? And as far as having no place to lay your head, what would happen if all of us would take literally that claim to sell all and follow Jesus? What would happen if all of the civility and the humanity and all of the common courtesy of our lives were suddenly to be thrown up in this absolute charge to follow Jesus?

And what would it mean to follow Jesus today, anyway? I know what it would not mean in Zeeland, Michigan. It would not mean to gather over against those kids that are wearing the t-shirts with the wrong lettering on them! It would not mean to join the march for Jesus down the streets, impressing everybody with the numbers of people and the triumphalistic kind of posture that seems to be more and more prevalent in our communities. What is it to follow Jesus? Jesus had a firm resolve; he knew who he was and he knew where he was going.

I want to say to you that this is a time in which we listen and we meditate and we contemplate and we allow the images of Jesus to wash over us, and I trust that all of us in the contemplation of that life stand in awe and feel a compelling urge, likewise, to be faithful and true and to respond responsibly at the moment at which we are confronted with this decision in whatever circumstance. You wouldn't be here if that wasn't true of you. And rather than going out of here today and saying, "I can't follow Jesus. I'm not going to let the dead bury their dead, and I want a roof over my head," understand that as a sign and a symbol of the radicality and the priority of the kingdom of God, but recognize also that that priority is to be worked out in the ordinariness of our lives.

I want you to go out of here today knowing that you are going to be stumbling and mumbling and fumbling, you are going to be halting and limping and wimping. Your discipleship will never measure up over against the gospel, you'll always fall short, and you'll have to plead for mercy. And I want you to know it's okay because you're only human. I know in your heart you want to follow that way; I know in your heart you want to be people who are responsible and compassionate and just; I believe that you are doing the best that you can. No, you're not. You're not doing the best you can, but you're doing pretty well, and I want to commend you for that. You are good people; you're serious people, and Jesus with his firm resolve is a model and, as God gives us grace, we seek to follow. But, you can go crazy with despair and give up in resignation unless there's some healthy balance and recognition of the totality of our human response to that call of Jesus.

Some of you know Glenn VanNoord who was a member here with his family for some years, who last Sunday died suddenly at age 51, and Nancy and I went to visit the family in Grand Rapids, and the open casket had a plaque in the background. I don't know the history; obviously there's a story about that little plaque, but it had the words of Micah, "And what does the Lord require? The Lord has told you to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." It was an epitaph for Glenn, and it's a fitting epitaph for any one of us. Jesus had a firm resolve; he knew he had to go to Jerusalem. There may be someone here

who's going to have to go to Jerusalem someday, I don't know. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had to go to Jerusalem. When they confronted him with the possibility of joining that plot to assassinate Hitler, he had to struggle and wrestle with his own pacifist inclination over against the demonic darkness that was happening in the death camps, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer had to go to Jerusalem. In that concrete situation, that's how he followed Jesus.

Gandhi mobilized a whole people with non-violence in a violent world, transformed a landscape. One day he knew he had to march to the sea and he marched to the sea.

We have these models, we have these examples, and for us in the Christian tradition, Jesus is that supreme example, that face. And we stand before it condemned, of course, because we are accommodating and we're compromising. We don't get it; we don't see it. We are of the spirit of James and John all too often. We jockey for power and position. We forget all of that so quickly in the concrete situation. But, then, once in a while, now and again, here and there, there's a set of circumstances, there's an instance, and suddenly we know, and then we know, and then we go with firm resolve, and then we don't count the consequences. There may be someone here who is on the threshold of that, I don't know. For the most of us I think it's going to be pretty much business as usual and another Lent. And yet, as a congregation, maybe we have to ask ourselves where is our Jerusalem? Is it time to set our face like a flint? Is there a Jerusalem out there beckoning us in a world in which religious commitments create the danger or the peril, in a world in which the demonic side, the shadow side of religion continues with its exclusivism, its competition, its lust for power?

In a few minutes, Ed Post and I are going to be talking about worldviews. Can a world exist with competing worldviews? Eward Cousins, in *Christ for the 21st Century*, says you can't do it in the old way anymore. Between 800 and 200 BCE, all the great religions of the world arose, independently, and he thinks that maybe we're on in that second axial period when that which has prevailed for 2000+ years needs to make a significant turn. Now a global consciousness and a global community. Is it that which we are supposed to wrestle with and struggle with and advocate? Where do we have to move? Where are we going?

Ah, for most of us I suppose it's going to be business as usual, a rather ordinary Lent. That's not so bad, because we're only human. God knows we're harder on ourselves than God is. But, on the other hand, if we hang around Jesus, it just might be that we'll discover where we have to go in order to be true to the vision, in order to be faithful to God. And if we see it, then we better do it.