

Homily, St. Andrew's
Lent 2C, Feb 21, 2016
Luke 13:31-35

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

In the final scenes of the Harry Potter saga, at the climax of the conflict between Harry and the evil Lord Voldemort, Harry has a critical choice to make. He and his friends have been searching for objects infused with bits of Voldemort's soul, called horcrux's, that Voldemort made as a means to immortality. Their existence means that even if Voldemort is killed, something of him survives such that he can be re-born at some point. And so to finally and completely eliminate Voldemort, these objects must also be destroyed. As the saga reaches its climax, Harry learns that in the terrible event that gave him his famous scar, he too became a kind of horcrux. A part of Voldemort lives in Harry and the only way that evil presence can be eliminated is for Harry too to be killed. It is a terrible realization.

At this point in the story, the great wizard Dumbledore has already died but well before his demise, he set up a chain of events that he hoped would lead to new life for everyone. In his will, Dumbledore had left to Harry the first snitch (a small flying ball) he caught in a sporting competition at Hogwarts. When Harry touched it as he had that first time, words appeared on it: "I open at the close." It didn't actually open, however, and neither Harry nor his friends knew what the words meant. Until, that is, the full realization came that for the evil of Voldemort to be finally and fully eliminated, Harry would also have to die. When Harry finally understood the full implications of the life he had received, he found himself ready. As he made his way into the forest alone to face his fate, he takes the snitch out of his pocket and says aloud: "I'm ready to die." With a heart-felt decision made in full understanding and with a determined peace, he touches the snitch once more and this time, the snitch opens to reveal a small stone... it is the legendary magical item called "the resurrection stone." It wasn't the first time that Dumbledore used his magical power to set up circumstances that shifted depending on an individual's state of heart and mind. In this case, Harry had to ready and prepared to die. Dumbledore provided a way for Harry to live again once Voldemort had killed him and the piece of his own soul too. It's the stuff great fairy tales, great sagas of good against evil, are made of!

The strange passage we hear today from Luke's Gospel likewise points to impending death and Jesus sense of calling in the life he had received. We are in the middle of things in the Gospel. Jesus is in the midst of teaching and preaching and healing as he travels around, gradually making his way to Jerusalem. Along the way, today some Pharisees attempt to warn him away from the journey on which he is set: "Get away from here," they command, "for Herod wants to kill you." For all the negative press that the Pharisees have received over the years, this attempt to warn Jesus away from his dangerous path seems odd and oddly caring. Are the Pharisees being cunning? Are they trying to lure Jesus into some kind of fancy trap? There's no way to know and no real reason to suspect that their concern is anything but genuine.

It doesn't, however, seem to matter. Because whatever the motivation and intent of the Pharisees, Jesus is determined: "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.'" Besides the fact

that name-calling is unhelpful and probably unnecessary, it seems rather foolishness to insult the one who has already been identified as a serious threat. But Herod's power, Herod's threat, and Herod's character is not really the point. When we focus on Jesus instead, laying aside the childish name-calling, we notice Jesus' passion, confidence and commitment to his calling. Notice how Jesus' response indicates that threats and intimidation, danger even to his life, won't sway him from his understanding of his calling and his willingness to follow wherever that takes him: "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." Nothing was going to take Jesus away from his purpose.

For this to be the case, Jesus had to know and understand his purpose. I wonder if we would be we as sure, as confident, as unwavering about our purpose in a similar circumstance? Knowing our primary purpose, the specific mission to which we are called, is a necessary step in the journey of our faith. We can only hold fast to a path if we know what it is. We may not know its ending. We may not be able to see around the next corner. But a strong sense of overall purpose is critical in being able to withstand the temptation, the pressure, to turn away or to change course.

With such confidence of purpose, Jesus doesn't react with fear to the Pharisees warning... at least not in his verbal response. Jesus may well feel afraid on the inside, but all we really know of his reaction is what he says and the choices he continues to make. Whatever he might feel, Jesus expresses confidence in his direction and in his role: "... today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." It's clear: if Jesus is a prophet and he just stays away from Jerusalem, he won't be killed. Or if he isn't really a prophet and he goes to Jerusalem, all is well. But the prophetic role is one that Jesus has clearly embraced from the beginning and he understands the consequences. In the early days of his ministry he almost gets thrown off a cliff near his hometown because he provokes the people to rage by speaking prophetically. Jesus knows who he is, and chooses to act out of it at all costs. Because of the strength of his conviction, Jesus is free to act out of love rather than fear.

Fear and love are the two great motivators in our world and in our lives. One of my enduring memories of my interview here is of one member of the search committee talking about great love and great fear. It is a common struggle in the church and for each of us individually. The challenge of the Gospel is to choose to act out of our love rather than our fear. It is much more difficult. Living out of love opens us up to being hurt and rejected... while living out of fear keeps us safe by building defences. Fear craves security while love lets us fly. Fear has us hold tight; love helps us to let go and trust that we will be carried. And when we do fall, when we fail, love strengthens us to stand up and try again while fear wants us to stay in the dirt. Fear tells us we are weak and shameful while love whispers that we are worthy. Instead of letting our fear be our primary guide, we can let our love for our church, for our tradition and for the Gospel of Christ lead us into all manner of dangerous places where the fullness of life and the abundance of joy is found... even at the risk of our lives.

On Ash Wednesday, just 10 days ago, we received the sign of ashes with the words: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This ritual encourages us to bravely face our own mortality, as Jesus does today with his prediction of his own death as a prophet. It is counter-intuitive as the path to fullness of life and yet Atul Gawande's work in his book *Being*

Mortal: Medicine and What Matter in the End expresses something similar, though in a very different way. After reviewing research into the impact of talking about mortality and engaging in hospice care instead of or alongside curative efforts with terminally ill patients, his conclusions are shocking. “The lesson seems almost Zen:” Dr. Gawande writes, “you live longer only when you stop trying to live longer.” (178) He is referring particularly to people nearing the end of life with terminal illnesses, for whom the research shows that ending “hail Mary” curative attempts results in better, and often longer, life. It seems a rare moment when medical research and biblical story - science and religion - come together to both conclude that letting go of the fear of death leads to greater quality of life.

Throughout his life, but particularly as he began the long road to Jerusalem, Jesus knew the fragility of life and the strength of a purpose beyond mere survival. Jesus’ words today loom, as one writer describes, “. . . as omens of the fateful events that lie ahead. Jesus’ pronouncements serve as oracles that prepare the reader to understand Jesus’ death and the fate of Jerusalem.” (NIB, 280) Like prophets before him and mirrored in the popular story of Harry Potter and his magical world, the strength of purpose and the power of love can transcend the normal human fear of suffering and death and bring about a transformation greater than anything we can ask or imagine. These stories teach us that we need not live at the mercy of the worst parts of ourselves or of the world, but rather, we can choose something else. Today Jesus expresses the confidence that “both [his] journey to Jerusalem and his death there will be controlled by his faithfulness to God’s redemptive purposes, not by Herod.” (NIB, 281)

May we too choose to live out of faithfulness to God’s redemptive purposes, God’s great love for all people. May we seek to deeply understand the mission, to which God calls us so that we will not be turned away by threat, even of death. May we reject fear and courageously face our own mortality so that we may live with the joyful abandon that confidence and peace brings.