



Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday in Lent

Date: March 4, 2007

Title: I Have Decided to Follow Jesus

I don't know how many of you attended church camp when you were young. My family didn't do much of that during my childhood. But I've been to my share of church camps since becoming a pastor 22 years ago. One thing I love about church camp is the music. We sing some campy, fireside songs. We sing some favorite Lutheran numbers. And every once-in-a-while, we make our way into the Baptist or Methodist hymnal, and sing an old revival song. There are some great ones. They don't exactly line up point for point with our Lutheran way of thinking about things. But they tug at the heart strings like nothing else, and so we pull them out from time to time. One of my favorites is, "I have decided to follow Jesus."ⁱ Sing with me if you remember the words:

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back. No turning back.

FIRST LESSON

**GENESIS 15:1-12,
17-18**

OR

I SAMUEL 16:14-23

PSALM

PSALM 27

SECOND LESSON

PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 13:31-35

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**HEAVENLY FATHER, IT IS
YOUR GLORY ALWAYS TO
HAVE MERCY. BRING BACK
ALL WHO HAVE ERRED AND
STRAYED FROM YOUR WAYS;
LEAD THEM AGAIN TO
EMBRACE IN FAITH THE
TRUTH OF YOUR WORD AND
TO HOLD IT FAST; THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST YOUR SON
OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.**

Now let me offer this disclaimer: I'm not a fan of decision theology. It worked for Billy Graham, and he certainly helped many people discover the difference Christ can make in their lives. But when I am challenged to make a decision to follow Jesus, I fail more often than I succeed. I have every good intention, of course. I have decided, numerous times, to take discipleship more seriously. I have decided, numerous times, to be a stronger and more courageous witness to my faith. I have decided, numerous times, to be more structured and intentional about how I take care of my body and my soul. It reminds me of my High School friend, who once said to me: "It's easy to quit smoking cigarettes. I've done it dozens of times." His decisions to quite smoking never lasted long. And invariably, my decisions to take a step deeper into my faith usually last a week or two at best, and then I am back to my own self. My own sinful, undisciplined, spontaneous self. That frustrates me to no end.

Of course, we have the example of our Lord. His life gives us a glimpse of what it means to live with faith at the very center. We see it in his passion, in his commitment, in his love, in his compassion for the needs of the people he met. They speak volumes about the kind of life that pleases God – the kind of life God wants us to live. The life of Jesus serves as an example to us all of what it means to live in this world as a believer.

For example, in chapter nine of St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem, and from that point on, nothing can stop him from following his destiny: from moving towards the suffering, pain and death of Good Friday. He believed that it was God's will for him, and no human influence could change his mind. In this morning's text, a group of Pharisees become concerned about him and they try to prevent him from heading to Jerusalem. His own disciples even tried to dissuade him, but once Jesus has made a decision, that is it. There is no turning back. Not even the possibility of a gruesome death can deter him.

I know that's what it means to live a faithful life. I know that if we lived in a perfect world, we would all have that kind of resolve. We would all make the decision to involve God in every aspect of our lives, and we would do it. We would all make the decision to share our faith at every opportunity, and we would do it. We would all make the decision to spend time in study and prayer each day, and we would do it. We would

9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

VOICE

(303) 770-9300

FAX

(303) 770-9301

WEB

WWW.STPLC.ORG

ⁱ This folk song originated among the Garo Indians, one of the hill tribes in India. The Garo tribe lives in an area that is now the state of Meghalaya, but was until 1970 the state of Assam. The northern part of Meghalaya borders on the Himalayan Mountain range. The earliest appearance of the hymn in the United States seems to have been in Choice Light and Life, a 1950 publication of the Free Methodist Church (Winona Lake, Ind.), compiled by LeRoy M. Lowell. The tune was named ASSAM in Christian Praise (Nashville, 1964), for the province of India where the Garos lived.

all make the decision to give ten percent of our income to the ministries of this congregation, and we would do it. If we lived in a perfect world, you and I would all decide to follow Jesus, and we would do it.

We don't live in a perfect world, of course, and that is the problem. Our efforts to be faithful don't even begin to measure up to what we see in the life of Jesus, because our sinful nature prevents us from giving ourselves fully to God. And we're not the first. The same thing was true in ancient Israel. If the world was perfect, the message of the prophets would have been enough to turn believers back to a true faith in God, and Jesus would never have been necessary. That wasn't the case then, and it isn't the case now. The history of God's people teaches us that when it comes to salvation and our relationship with God – when it comes to making a decision for our faith – God's people haven't appeared to be much stronger than those vulnerable chicks Jesus mentions in today's Gospel lesson:

*Jerusalem, 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!* [St. Luke 13:34]

I've made it clear this week that I don't particularly like this message. I don't like to think of myself as weak and vulnerable and needing to hide under the wings of the mother hen. It is a lot more gratifying to think of myself as being in control of my own destiny, and capable of facing anything that comes my way. That's the way things work in this world, you know. Those who work the hardest – those who truly apply themselves – those are the ones who are most likely to succeed in our world. We're a lot more influenced by social Darwinism than we care to admit. That's the way the world thinks about things.

Unfortunately, that line of thinking is neither consistent with this morning's text nor with the Christian message as a whole. The Christian Gospel is this: if our relationship with God or our salvation depends on our ability to make the right choices, then we don't have much hope. We're no more capable of saving ourselves than those little chicks are of fighting off a hungry fox. Our only hope is that Christ will become our salvation. Our only hope is that the gifts of peace and eternity will be given to us not because of what we've done, but because of who God is.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has done just that. On the cross of Calvary Jesus gave his life, and set us free from the bondage to sin and death. In the empty tomb, God's ability to bring new life out of death is proclaimed. And we are the recipients of that proclamation. Our salvation is not based on our personal accomplishments, but it is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; not on our reliability, but on God's trustworthiness. That may not be the way the world thinks, but it is the way the Gospel is proclaimed.

So from that perspective, even though the first stanza of that old hymn is a bit disappointing, by the end of the song it gets it right. It may start out far too immersed in decision theology, but it ends up making a strong proclamation of the cross of Jesus Christ. The world may attempt to seduce us into thinking that we can do it all on our own, but the cross and the empty tomb proclaim that Christ has already done it for us. It is his death and his resurrection that give us a hope that lasts even beyond this life. And so we sing:

The cross before me, the world behind me.
The cross before me, the world behind me.
The cross before me, the world behind me.
No turning back. No turning back.

The world tells me to be all that I can be; to reach for the gusto; to just do it... but my faith calls me to look to the cross of Jesus for hope. I still don't like being the helpless chick, huddled under a mother hen's wings. But I am thankful that God, who knows me better than I know myself, understands that this is the only way I can have true hope. And I pray you are thankful too.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 4, 2007)

English Text: ⁱ

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He 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.' ³³ Yet 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.' ³⁴ Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵ See, 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.' ". ⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

³¹ Ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ προσῆλθον τινες Φαρισαῖοι λέγοντες αὐτῷ· ἐξελθε καὶ πορεύου ἐντεῦθεν, ὅτι Ἡρώδης θέλει σε ἀποκτεῖναι. ³² καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· πορευθέντες εἶπατε τῇ ἀλώπεκι ταύτῃ· ἴδου ἐκβάλλω δαιμόνια καὶ ἰάσεις ἀποτελῶ σήμερον καὶ αὔριον καὶ τῇ τρίτῃ τελειοῦμαι. ³³ πλὴν δεῖ με σήμερον καὶ αὔριον καὶ τῇ ἐχομένῃ πορεύεσθαι, ὅτι οὐκ ἐνδέχεται προφήτην ἀπολέσθαι ἔξω Ἰερουσαλήμ. ³⁴ Ἰερουσαλήμ Ἰερουσαλήμ, ἡ ἀποκτείνουσα τοὺς προφήτας καὶ λιθοβολοῦσα τοὺς ἀπεσταλμένους πρὸς αὐτήν, ποσάκις ἠθέλησα ἐπισυνάξαι τὰ τέκνα σου ὃν τρόπον ὄρνις τὴν ἑαυτῆς νοσσιᾶν ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγας, καὶ οὐκ ἠθελήσατε. ³⁵ ἴδου ἀφίεται ὑμῖν ὁ οἶκος ὑμῶν. λέγω [δὲ] ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ ἴδητε με ἕως [ἤξει ὅτε] εἶπητε· εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου. ⁱⁱⁱ

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus (author unknown)

[Search across one or more PDF files]

1. I have de - cid - ed to fol - low Je - sus; I have de - cid - ed to fol - low Je - sus;
 2. Though I may won - der, I still will fol - low; Though I may won - der, I still will fol - low;
 3. The world be - hind me, the cross be - fore me; The world be - hind me, the cross be - fore me;
 4. Though none go with me, still I will fol - low; Though none go with me, still I will fol - low;
 5. Will you de - cid - e now to fol - low Je - sus? Will you de - cid - e now to fol - low Je - sus?

I have de - cid - ed to fol - low Je - sus; No turn - ing back, no turn - ing back.
 Though I may won - der, I still will fol - low; No turn - ing back, no turn - ing back.
 The world be - hind me, the cross be - fore me; No turn - ing back, no turn - ing back.
 Though none go with me, still I will fol - low; No turn - ing back, no turn - ing back.
 Will you de - cid - e now to fol - low Je - sus? No turn - ing back, no turn - ing back.

ⁱ Link to: http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/calendar_for_2001.html for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

ⁱⁱ St. Luke 13:31-35 *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 13:31-35, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).