

## HE TURNED HIS FACE TOWARD JERUSALEM

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Towson Presbyterian Church  
February 14, 2010

Psalm 16

Luke 9:28-31, 51-62

You may not have realized it when you made your way through the snow this morning, but this Sunday is a major turning point in the church's year. Today, the transfigured Christ turns his blazing face toward Jerusalem and certain death at the hands of his enemies. We're going to be following Jesus as he journeys from Galilee in the North to Jerusalem in the South and then, beginning next Sunday, we'll be retracing his steps during the last week of his life here on earth. Our sermons between now and Easter will follow in Jesus' path, day by day through his last week. Next Sunday, the first Sunday in Lent, we're going to celebrate Palm Sunday here at Towson Presbyterian Church. That usually happens at the very end of the season of Lent. We're going to celebrate it at the beginning of the season because that's how the last week of Jesus' life begins. We'll have the palm branches. We'll remember the entrance into Jerusalem. The Sunday after that, we'll be marking Holy Monday, and then Holy Tuesday the next weekend, Holy Wednesday after that, and so on, until we come to Easter.

We'll be walking in Jesus' footsteps, trying to understand the answer to several questions. What kind of king is this? What kind of kingdom is he ushering in? And what does he expect of his subjects? Each week we're going to be wrestling with these questions. As we do, you're also invited and encouraged to take part in reading a book-in-common with other members of the congregation, a book called *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*, by two prominent biblical scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. We have copies of it for sale today in Thompson Hall. They're \$10. You can read this on your own if you'd like, but I would recommend joining one of the small groups that are forming to study the book together. There are seven or eight different groups you can choose from, and they meet at various times during the week, so at least one should be convenient for almost everyone's schedule.

Our hope is that the book study and the sermons will complement one another and help us all to understand more deeply the meaning of Lent and to prepare ourselves in a fresh way to celebrate this year Christ's death and resurrection.

"Now as we begin this journey, let me remind you that Jesus spent most of his life in the northern part of the Holy Land, in Galilee. [Nazareth, his home town, was in Galilee.] Most of his ministry has been in Galilee. But now, Jesus sets his face resolutely towards Jerusalem. "Listen again to St. Luke's account of the story which is always read on this day:

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and

his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

“According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this event—called the Transfiguration—is the most unambiguous revelation of Jesus as Messiah prior to the Resurrection. As Peter, James, and John watch the dazzling scene, the voice of God himself declares Jesus to be his Son. The appearance of Moses and Elijah ratifies the designation of Jesus as the Chosen One of Israel, the fulfillment of the Law [represented by Moses] and the Prophets [represented by Elijah]. This is the original ‘mountaintop experience.’

“[I don’t know about you, but on those rare occasions when I’ve had that kind of peak experience, I didn’t want it to end. I think that’s part of our human nature. We don’t want to come down from the mountaintops, down from the high. So it says a lot about Jesus that] he knows he cannot stay on the summit soaking up the view. He and Moses and Elijah speak together, but not of peak experiences. They speak of ‘his departure which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. And a cloud came and overshadowed them; [Luke says] and [the disciples] were afraid.’

“Peter and James and John saw two things that day on the mountain. They saw Jesus with the veil lifted to reveal his glory; and then they saw the clouds coming.

“For you see, [Jesus—the love of God, the passion of God for that kingdom of justice and mercy that Jesus proclaimed—] cannot stay on the mountaintop. [He] must come down. [He] must go where [he] is most needed, not at the pinnacle of [glory, wielding power over all the kingdoms of the earth], but in the valley of the shadow of death...

“In his book, *Pillar of Fire*, the second volume of his trilogy about the civil rights movement, Taylor Branch tells the story of Martin Luther King, Jr., travelling to Oslo as the guest of the King of Sweden to receive the Nobel Peace Prize [in December 1964]. As the undisputed leader of a movement that had captured the imagination of people around the globe, as the newly minted toast of nations, [Dr. King by] now had access to the crowned heads of Europe and the inner circles of power in Washington. Surely he could not [have been] faulted if he became a highly paid fixture on the lecture circuit. Who would have blamed him if he had retired from the barricades, directing future operations from the rear? [Of course, that wasn’t King’s path. As Branch writes,] ‘King’s inner course was *fixed downward*, toward the sanitation workers of Memphis.’<sup>2</sup> In Memphis, there was a bullet waiting.

“Love comes down. [The apostle Paul writes,] ‘Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’ Love is grateful for the experience on the mountaintop, but knows that it cannot stay there. Love persists when the glory has faded, when the romance has fled, when the curtain has been dropped on the stage set. Love never gives up. The King James Version is stronger in some ways; Love ‘suffereth long and is kind; love vaunteth not itself; is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, is

<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:28-31.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor Branch, *Pillars of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 613. Emphasis added.

not easily provoked . . . love never faileth.’ Love does not even require reciprocity; love goes to Memphis, love gets down on the pavement, love goes to Jerusalem where the enemy lies in wait...

“On this day, Jesus turns his back on his glory and begins his descent into the valley. He comes down from the mountain; he comes down from the throne of the majesty on high; he comes down from the infinite spaces of untreated light and prepares to enter the darkness of human suffering and human pain. God is not looking down with detachment from a great distance. God did not remain majestically aloof somewhere over the rainbow. God is not a distant observer of our struggles. I had a [parishioner], dying of cancer. He said to me, ‘I have never doubted the existence of God. But does God care that I’m sick?’ Yes. Yes, God does care. As Jesus of Nazareth sets his face toward Jerusalem, he is about to become in his own person the embrace of God for all the misery of all the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus said this about how he understood his calling: “‘The Son of Man [he said,] did not come to be served. He came to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many people.’<sup>4</sup> [Now, that] phrase ‘Son of Man’ [was for the Jews] a statement of authority and power.

“Consider all the titles Jesus could have used to define himself on earth: King of kings, the great I AM, the Beginning and the End, the Lord of All, Jehovah, High and Holy. All of these and a dozen others would have been appropriate.

“But Jesus didn’t use them.

“Instead, he called himself the Son of Man. This title appears eighty-two times in the New Testament. Eighty-one of which are in the Gospels. Eighty of which are directly from the lips of Jesus.

“To the Jews the Son of Man was a symbol of triumph. The conqueror. The equalizer. The score-settler. The big brother. The intimidator. The Starship Enterprise. The right arm of the High and Holy. The king who roared down from the heavens in a fiery chariot of vengeance and anger toward those who have oppressed God’s holy people.<sup>5</sup>

“The Son of Man was the four-starred general who called his army to invade and led his troops to victory. For that reason when Jesus spoke of the Son of Man in terms of power, the people cheered. When he spoke of a new world where the Son of Man would sit on his glorious throne<sup>6</sup>, the people understood. When he spoke of the Son of Man who would come on the clouds of heaven with great power and authority<sup>7</sup>, the people could

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<sup>3</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 82-85.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 20:28.

<sup>5</sup> For further reference consider the Book of Enoch, an intertestamental book completed something around 70 BCE. This ancient manuscript tells us what picture came to the minds of people when they heard the title “the Son of Man.”

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 19:28.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 17:26, 30.

envision the scene. When he spoke of the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power<sup>8</sup>, everyone could imagine the picture.

But what's this he's saying? 'The Son of Man did not come to be served. He came to serve others.' Earlier he'd told them, 'The Son of Man will be handed over to people, and they will kill him. After three days, he will rise from the dead.'<sup>9</sup>

"Wait a minute! That's an impossible, incredible, intolerable contradiction of terms. No wonder his disciples "did not understand what Jesus meant, and they were afraid to ask him."<sup>10</sup> The king who came to serve? The Son of Man being betrayed? The Conqueror—killed? The Ambassador of the Ancient of Days—mocked? Spit upon?

"But such is the irony of Jesus wearing the title 'the Son of Man.' It is also the irony of the cross. Calvary is a hybrid of God's lofty status and his deep devotion. The thunderclap which echoed when God's sovereignty collided with his love. The marriage of heaven's kingship and heaven's compassion.<sup>11</sup> The very instrument of the cross is symbolic, the vertical beam of holiness intersecting with the horizontal bar of love...

Some of you may be familiar with the story of how General Dwight David Eisenhower spent the night before the great D-Day invasion with the men of the 101st Airborne. They called themselves The Screaming Eagles. As his men prepared their planes and checked their equipment, Ike went from soldier to soldier offering words of encouragement. Many of the flyers were young enough to be his sons. He treated them as if they were. A correspondent wrote that as Eisenhower watched the C-47s take off and disappear into the darkness [that night], his hands were sunk deeply into his pockets and his eyes were full of tears."

"The general then went to his quarters and sat at his desk. He took a pen and paper and wrote a message—a message which would be delivered to the White House in the event of a defeat.

"It was as brief as it was courageous. 'Our landings . . . have failed. . . the troops, the Air, and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches itself to the attempt it was mine alone.'<sup>12</sup>

"It could be argued that the greatest act of courage that day was not in a cockpit or foxhole, but at a desk when the one at the top took responsibility for the ones below. When the one in charge took the blame—even before the blame needed to be taken.

"Rare leader, this general. Unusual, this display of courage. He modeled a quality seldom seen in our society of lawsuits, dismissals, and divorces. Most of us are willing to

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 26:64.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 9:31.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 9:32.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 20:28 isn't the only passage which speaks of the dualism of God. He is the Lord "who shows mercy, who is kind...but he does not forget to punish guilty people" (Exodus 34:6,7). He is the only "good God." At the same time he is the "Savior" (Isaiah 45:21). He is equally "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). He is the God who in wrath cannot remember mercy (Hebrews 3:2). In a precious insight Micah states to God, "You will not stay angry forever, because you enjoy being kind" (Micah 7:18). "God," states Paul, "is kind but also very strict" (Romans 11:22). He is able to "judge rightly and...makes right any person who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

<sup>12</sup> "D-Day Recalling Military Gamble That Shaped History," *Time*, May 28, 1984, 16.

take credit for the good we do. Some are willing to take the rap for the bad we do. But few will assume responsibilities for the mistakes of others. Still fewer will shoulder the blame for mistakes yet uncommitted.

“Eisenhower did. As a result, he became a hero.

“Jesus did. [That’s why he call him] our Savior.

“Before the war began, he forgave. Before a mistake could be made, forgiveness was offered. Before blame could be given, grace was provided.

“The one at the top took responsibility for the ones at the bottom. “Jesus wears a sovereign crown but bears a father’s heart.

“He is a general who takes responsibility for his soldiers’ mistakes.

“But Jesus didn’t write a note, he paid the price. He didn’t just assume the blame, he seized the sin. He became the ransom. He is the general who dies in the place of the private, the King who suffers for the peasant, the Master who sacrifices himself for the servant.

“He is the Son of Man who came to serve and to give his life as a ransom ... for you.”<sup>13</sup>

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>13</sup> Max Lucado, *The Final Week of Jesus* (New York: Multnomah Books, 1994), 19-22.