

**Christ Episcopal Church
Montpelier, Vermont
Sermon, Year C, 4th Sunday after Epiphany (a/k/a Super Bowl Sunday), 3 February 2019¹
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The Moment of Truth

In the Name and praise of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Good morning.

Today's gospel is from Luke's chapter 4. To help understand the context, Chapter 3 concludes with the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. Chapter 4 begins with Jesus being led to the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and then Jesus rejecting three temptations set out by the devil.

Last week's gospel began with these words:

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

Uh-oh. Most of us know that when everybody is saying good stuff about us, get ready, because it's not going to stay that way. Indeed, David Simpson, our preacher last week, gave a spoiler-alert for this week's gospel, that it wasn't going to go well for Jesus when he returned to Nazareth, where he had been raised. Last week's Gospel reported that Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and read these words from the prophet Isaiah written seven centuries earlier:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

¹ Sermon YrC3FEB19(Moment of Truth)F. Jeremiah 1:4-10; Ps. 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30.

Last week's gospel ended, and today's begins, with Jesus saying: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Wait a minute, the locals say, isn't this guy the son of Joseph the carpenter? Jesus says no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown, and then gets in big trouble when he gave two examples of Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Elisha [*Ah Leash Ah*]. Amidst a severe famine for the Hebrews, these two prophets were sent by God to help *Gentiles*, as told in Kings 1 and 2 of the Hebrew Scriptures.² Elijah was sent to aid a starving Gentile widow, and the prophet Elisha cured a Syrian military commander of leprosy. Upon being reminded of this by Jesus, they were filled with rage and led him to a place where they could hurl him off a cliff.

Jesus was both God and human. Being human, Jesus did not necessarily always choose the wisest thing to say. Here's what one commentator had to say on this passage from today's gospel:

While Scripture had maintained that Elijah was sent to a widow of Sidon rather than to one in Israel ... and that the only leper whom Elisha had been able to cure was a Syrian military commander ..., not even Galileans who were far removed from the center of national life cared to be reminded of the fact. Yet it is this outburst of nationalistic fervor at the insinuation that God goes to any who have human need ... leads the neighbors of Jesus to go berserk. That Gentiles could be admitted to God's kingdom was utterly unthinkable to the chosen ones. So they sought to kill Jesus.³

I can identify with how Jesus responded. When I feel under attack, sometimes I launch a counter-attack, even if I instinctively sense that it's likely to expand the battlefield. As the expression goes: "Well, Stephen, how did that work out for 'ya?" I'm not defending the action of the

² 1 Kings 17:8-16 and 2 Kings 5:1-14.

³ *Understanding the Sunday Scriptures, The Synthesis Commentary, Year C*, Pasha Publications (1997). The two breaks in the quotation are for the Biblical citations, the first being to 1 Kg. 17:8-16 and the second to 2 Kg. 5:1-14.

local crowd, but Jesus' response, although factually accurate, almost got him killed. The prayer, from today's Psalm 71 come to mind:

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,

You are my crag and my stronghold.

Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked...

There are some similar words in Ps. 31, a favorite prayer of mine:

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,

For you are my crag and my stronghold;

For the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me. ⁴

Let's consider St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians we heard today, that "faith, hope, and love abide ... and the greatest of these is love."⁵ I've heard that read many times and I believe that love is the greatest of those gifts. Yet in preparing for this sermon, I saw more, in pairing this gospel and Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The people at the synagogue in Nazareth probably had faith, they knew Scripture, they had hope, including in the prophecies proclaimed by Isaiah, but that day they lacked love. And in the absence of the light of love, nationalism, ego and entitlement brought them to murderous rage. Paul said it: "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."⁶

It wasn't just Paul who spoke of the primacy of love. The two great commandments are to *love your God* and to *love your neighbor as yourself*. At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."⁷

⁴ Ps. 31, v. 3.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:2.

⁷ John, 15:12.

Today is the 4th Sunday after Epiphany. A *New York Times* article alerted me that today is also Holocaust Remembrance Day – the 74th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz.⁸ The Nazi death camps together killed an estimated six million Jews, along with other disfavored people including the disabled who had lived in institutions, gypsies and many who had lived in Poland.⁹

The article was about a Portuguese diplomat named Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who was stationed in France at the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. Many Jewish refugees had fled to France, which in turn was subjected to the Nazi's invasion and round-up of Jews. Portugal's autocratic Prime Minister, Antonio Salazar, issued an order to all its consulates that they were not to issue visas to certain categories of people, basically including Jews, without direct approval from the Foreign Ministry in Portugal. Diplomat Sousa Mendes, who was not Jewish, made requests for visas for the refugee Jews amidst the Nazi round-ups. Salazar's government denied those requests. The French borders were about to close under Nazi control. Mr. Mendes signed *thousands* of visa requests working through long nights even though he had been stripped of that authority. It worked. It was perhaps the largest rescue action by a single individual during the Holocaust.

Salazar caused Mr. Mendes to be fired. This man, who had been born into a well-to-do family, put his career and his life on the line for the sake of persecuted people he did not know. This was courage. Then he was without a career, without a pension. He died in obscurity in 1954, impoverished, being fed by a Jewish soup kitchen.

⁸ "He Helped Jews Escape the Holocaust. He Died Unknown." Subtitle: "Aristedes de Sousa was his name. We should remember his courage." See also, NPR, newscast January 27, 2019: "Survivors Mark Holocaust Remembrance Day on 74th Anniversary of Auschwitz Liberation."

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<https://www.google.com/search?q=Estimate+of+how+many+Jews+killed+at+Auchwitz&oq=est&aqs=chrome.2.69i57j0j69i59j0l3.4053j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

Listen: Some people believe that your religion, your faith, your life, has to be a certain brand in order to be received into heaven. To those inclined to that view, with Mr. Sousa Mendes in mind, I ask this question:

What God of love,
for whom Love is the greatest gift,
would say to the person at heaven's gate,
who risked his career and life
to save thousands of strangers from extermination,
"You are not welcome here?" [pause].

The Spanish have a phrase, *el momento de la verdad*, the moment of truth. It originally applied to whether a matador would have sufficient courage at the decisive moment to face the bull, but it has been widely used in other contexts. Mr. Sousa Mendes faced a moment of truth. He could have said, "I tried, my government said no, I can't help you." Or he could do what he did, so those Jews could escape before the prison gate slammed closed.

Well, how about how we live our individual lives? Hey, we might say, I wouldn't be part of a murderous mob or face the desperate thousands. Yet, I have a feeling that for most of us, at some time in our lives, there is a critical moment of truth: Which way do I go when a lot is on the line? For all of us, we individually make a succession of decisions which change the landscape of our lives and the lives of others. Is love there? Is respect there?

The combination of reflecting on the gospel from today and last Sunday, Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and seeing the movie "The Green Book" this week has led me to do something I've never done in a sermon: to recommend a movie. This movie tells the story of a world-class,

sophisticated African-American classical and jazz musician, Don, who hires a white Italian-American bouncer, Tony, to be his driver and bodyguard, on a music tour through the deep South in 1962. The movie is based on interviews and letters about these two real people from very different backgrounds.

The film title is taken from *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a guidebook for African-American travelers in that period, written by a Mr. Victor Green, listing motels and restaurants that would *accept* African-Americans. The movie has already won many awards. It is currently playing at the Savoy here in Montpelier, and in Stowe and Williston.

One thing that I take from the movie is that the decisions people make along the way are important. There were decisive moments of truth in their lives and some of the people they encountered. Which way? Again, just because we aren't a diplomat at a crossroads doesn't mean that the choices we make, day by day, aren't important. They are.

Now I'm going to take what may seem like an odd detour, but hey -- have a little faith.

I'm part of a small group of writers led by Maggie Thompson, who is a member of the Christ Church choir. Maggie also serves as chair of the Bishop Discernment & Nominating Committee for the diocese of Vermont. You can read more about that on the website of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, and I encourage you to do so.

One exercise we do in every writers' meeting is to write spontaneously for about ten minutes in response to an announced "prompt," which may be a single word, short phrase or saying. Write whatever comes to mind, then we go 'round the table and each person reads aloud what they wrote. A recent prompt was from the 6th century Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu [*Lao -cha*], who said: "The softest things in the world overcome the hardest things." After Maggie read her piece, I asked if I

could use it in my sermon for today, mindful of Paul's letter to the Corinthians about love. Maggie agreed. Here's what she wrote:

When my father died – hard—my dogs and cows and mother – soft—soothed and comforted.

When my mother died – hard—nuzzling our new baby's head and our dog's smooth coat –soft—eased me into transition.

When our daughter got cancer –hard –the fluffy snow and neighboring horse –soft—grounded me.

Soft facilitates resilience.

Soft offers respite from the hard stuff.

Soft reminds me that it's always an option. Hard is not all there is.

Soft is breath – gentle, flowing, rhythmic.

Soft caresses and comforts the hard places, rounds the sharp edges.

Soft can easily be squashed by hard.

Soft needs intention, listening, and quiet.

In such space, soft unfolds in abundance, all around, a safe shelter.

Soft is kind. Hard is brutal.

Allow the generosity of soft.

It's there, waiting ...

For you and for me.

In closing, when we come to turning points, moments of truth in our lives, let us bear in mind what Paul wrote, what Maggie wrote, what Jesus said and what Jesus lived:

“And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Amen.