

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“The Heart of the Matter: A Heroic Heart”

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Isaiah 55:6-13, Luke 13:1-9

They needed a hero. The bad guys were out of control. They were oppressing the people. They were stealing from the small and weak. There was mayhem in the streets. The people needed a hero and so they called on...and I will let you finish the sentence. They called on Luke Skywalker. They called on Rambo. They called on Batman, Spiderman, and Superman. They called on Indiana Jones and John McClaine from the Die Hard series. They called on Dirty Harry, Harry Potter and 007. And today they are calling on an anti-hero named Deadpool whose movie is only for adults yet is breaking box-office records. We call on heroes who will blow things up; who will blow up death stars one and two and then a death planet. We call on heroes who will blow up cars, buildings and ultimately the bad guys and will leave havoc in their wake in order to make our world safe again. We call on heroes who will bend and break the rules to protect us. We call on heroes who are not afraid of violence. They needed a hero. We need heroes.

They needed a hero. The bad guys were out of control. They were oppressing the people. They were stealing money given to God in order to fund civic improvements. And so they called on...Jesus. This morning's story I would argue is one in which the people have had enough of their Roman overlords and are looking for a hero. The tale they tell of Jesus is one of brutality and death. The Roman ruler Pontius Pilot had decided that Jerusalem needed a new water source, an aqueduct. Rather than taxing his supporters he decided that he would steal the money from the Jewish Temple; money given to support the operation of Judaism's most sacred site. The Jews protested. They stood up to Pilot. In response Pilot let loose his goons, dressed like Jews, who killed dozens of the protestors. For the Jews coming to Jesus this was the final straw. Something had to be done. They needed a hero and Jesus was it. He was the charismatic leader of thousands. He had powers to heal and to drive out the demonic. He was their man. It was his time. The only question was, would Jesus step up, lead them and be the hero? Was Jesus the one with the heroic heart? The answer was no and yes.

The no side of the answer is the easy one. Rather than lead a popular uprising against Rome Jesus jumps all over those who had come to recruit him. He tells them that they needed to repent. Now to make sure that we are all on board with what repent means, the simplest way to describe it would be that we are to turn from doing what is wrong and turn to doing what is right. In this case it meant for the people to turn from a way of violent resistance to Rome; the desire to look for a super-hero who would lead them to freedom and victory, to another way of living as God's people. The line about how the people in Jerusalem were not more sinful than those around Jesus was his way of saying that those around him could expect the same outcome as those in Jerusalem. Just because they followed Jesus did not make them immune to the violence which would come from Rome. And if they didn't listen to Jesus, and instead went forward with their plans of rebellion they too would be crushed. In other words this was not just no, I'm not interested but no, this is not at all the way they ought to be acting.

So what about the yes? The yes comes in everything that Jesus had been preaching and teaching throughout his ministry. The yes is that Jesus asked them to abandon their search for a traditional action hero and instead take on a heroic heart like his own; the heart of a hero who believed that love was more powerful than hate; who believed that forgiveness was more powerful than revenge; who believed that serving others was more powerful than destroying others. This was the heroic heart of Jesus. You may be wondering why I call this a heroic heart. The reason I say this is because God's desire for the world is that it be a place in which people live in loving relationships; in which all persons are affirmed in their identity as children of God; in which there is forgiveness, compassion and mercy rather than violence and revenge. This is the kind of world Jesus came to create; this is that kingdom of God Isaiah referred to when he wrote, "You will go out in joy and return in peace." Jesus was the hero who would make this possible. He was the one who would stand up to the violence, hatred and animosity of the world, in order to demonstrate what this new creation could look like.

Turning and taking on a hero's heart like Jesus' is never easy. It's never easy for two reasons. First it is never easy because the world has always been in love with power and the violence that is often used to seize it and maintain it. You can see this in the ancient world...the Romans loved victory parades where those they defeated and captured could be humiliated and enslaved. You can see it today. This past week one of the local sports broadcasters was talking about an upcoming "retired players" hockey contest. The sportscaster was excited that the players might drop the gloves and get into a fight. When they didn't the broadcaster was disappointed. (My thought was these are retired guys playing for fun...why should we want them to hurt each other?)

The second reason it is not easy is that this penchant for violence is baked into us. I can personally attest to this. My former church had a gym and I would go a couple of days a week and play pick-up basketball. One evening I was running down court on a fast break, received a pass and went in for a lay-up. A member of the other team decide he would duck and cut my legs out from under me. If you have never had this happen it is kind of an amazing feeling to be flying through the air knowing you have no way to land. As I hit the floor on my back and then skidded into a wall, I probably should have taken a moment to be grateful that I was not injured. But no, I was up on my feet and in the face of the other player. There was not thinking, there was only reacting...and please picture it that I was about 50 and the other player in his 20's. Fortunately for me, cooler heads prevailed and we were separated. But that is what Jesus wants us to turn from. He wants us to repent of that instantaneous desire for violence, and turn instead to a different kind of hero heart.

Having that kind of hero heart is not easy, but it is worthwhile, because we become those who make for a better world. We become those who stop the cycle of violence and hate. We become those who bring peace and joy. My challenge to all of us here this morning is to ask ourselves, "How are we cultivating a hero's heart like Jesus' had? How are we allowing love to be our aim?"