

A SERMON FROM SAINT FRANCIS

JESUS OUR CHAMPION

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., *Good Friday*, April 2, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on a reading from the Gospel of John, 13: 31 – 33.

“Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’”

— *John 13: 33*

Thirty-five years ago this summer I sat in the bleachers of a stadium in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan about to try out for the varsity football team. The start of school was a month away. The helmets and the shoulder pads weren’t issued. The head coach had brought us together to tell us what to expect as we prepared for the season.

His name was Paul Baldwin. In the mid-fifties he had gone to college in Ann Arbor where he was a quarterback for the University of Michigan. One of the things I remember him saying that morning is this. “Boys,” he said. “I’ve got two rules. Rule #1: The coach is always right. Rule #2: If you think the coach is wrong, see Rule #1.”

Crucifixion was like that. If you were not a Roman citizen, Rome had two rules. Rome is in charge. And if you think Rome isn’t in charge, take a look around and think again. Crucifixion was to the Roman Empire what liturgy is to the Church: a service or work for the public good. That is what the word *liturgy* means. Crucifixion was the way Rome separated an insurrectionist from his life and separated other men from any thoughts they might be nursing to usurp the power of Rome. Brutally ergonomic and good publicity, it killed two birds with one stone. It made a man a scarecrow.

Jesus knew that. He grew up walking on the roads that Rome had built and seeing the great edifices Herod had put up. That Roman generals had a penchant for crosses was not lost on him. He went to Jerusalem and to a cross less as a moth to flame than as a soldier to a fight.

He had prepared for it by going alone to places, by going off by himself alone with increasing frequency as he began to attract a crowd. For him the presence of the One he called Father was most palpable when he isolated himself. The evangelist Matthew tells us that Jesus

withdrew “to a deserted place by himself” to absorb the shocking news that his cousin John had been beheaded. Off by himself he went to grieve and reckon with the loss of the one who understood him best. Off by himself, that is where Jesus “got his game face on” as they say in football and in the 82nd Airborne Division. Withdrawn in prayer talking to the Father, in solitude, for company, to use a phrase of Auden, Jesus gathered strength to face the approach of his own violent death.

The Bible is an extended work of military history. If we cannot see that, if we’re mindless to the combat being waged between good and evil from its third chapter to its end, then Jesus preparing for the combat he engages on the cross will be lost on us. No matter how many Good Fridays we observe, we won’t know what’s going on. We will be as senseless to why Jesus should be made a scarecrow as was Pilate. That morning as he shook his dog’s paw and descended his marble stair on his way to work, he had no clue that what he did that day would put his name on the lips of countless millions to the end of time.

Jesus was prepared to die, and he did what he could to prepare his followers for his departure by putting them at a distance. “I am with you only a little longer,” he said to them. “You will look for me but I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’” Jesus knew that there was a war going on, and as David picked up five stones before going out to meet Goliath, he readied himself for the battle that would bear him away.

“Where I am going, you cannot come,” he said, referring to his leaving for the ultimate out-of-the-way place.

At a quarter past six o’clock on Tuesday evening of this Holy Week, a classmate of my son Gabriel climbed the ten-foot-tall safety barrier surrounding the observation

deck of the Empire State Building and jumped. Cameron Dabaghi had left a suicide note in his room at Berkeley College, his residential college at Yale, apologizing for his plan to jump either from the George Washington Bridge or the Empire State Building. It was raining in New York. There were seven people on the observation deck at the time and one of them tried to talk him down. A reporter in the *New York Daily News* writes, "A man named Luis Mosquea was manning the front entrance of a women's boutique on West 34th Street across from where the young man landed, and he recalled in horror how stunned pedestrians scampered in every direction to flee the nightmarish sight. Said Mr. Mosquea, 'One guy ran over and covered the body with an umbrella.'"

At a vigil held Wednesday night at Yale, the Berkeley College Master Marvin Chun told a crowd of grieving students, "I saw Cameron as recently as yesterday, a few hours before he died. It was raining and I asked him to walk with me under my umbrella down Wall Street. He complimented my big, parachute-like umbrella with its bright red Berkeley shield. He said he didn't know that there was a Berkeley umbrella. I said that it hadn't been issued as Berkeley gear for a long time. And as we hit the corner I added that I could order a new batch if he really liked it. And he said he did. And then we parted our ways. So here's the guilty thought that I

shouldn't have but I can't get out of my mind. I wish I gave him that umbrella."

Where Jesus goes confronting the adversary we cannot come. We may only part ways with him and listen for the cry and stillness to follow after. We may wish to give him the flimsy thing we carry for shelter as if it could help him but we cannot help him. There is nothing we can do to help him.

Jesus is our champion. His fight there in the darkness of Golgotha ("the place of the skull") is his alone just as Israel's champion David smote Goliath by himself, cutting his head off and taking the skull to Jerusalem, winning victory on behalf of all the people of God. All there is for us to do is to sit in the bleachers we call pews and as spectators to overhear Jesus talking to the Father in solitude for company taking strength for the fight from the Most High. Maybe we look away. If you're me you look away and recall the other thing your high school football coach used to say. It was something that his coach at Michigan Bennie Oosterbaan said to his team that Oosterbaan kept in a notebook of the maxims he learned from his coach at Michigan, Fielding H. Yost. "The will to win is not worth a nickel unless you have the will to prepare."

The will to win is not worth a nickel unless you have the will to prepare. Jesus had the will to prepare. He goes to the cross prepared to die and, as our champion, to win. Amen.

For more information about Saint Francis Church and her life and mission just northwest of the Capital Beltway contact the church office at 10033 River Road, Potomac, Maryland or call us at 301-365-2055. See us on the web at stfrancispotomac.org.