

Exodus 3:1-6, 9-12; 4:1-5  
John 21:5-19

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
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## LEADING WITH A WHITE STICK

“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger you used to fasten your belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” *John 21:18*

On the roof of the Old Bailey in London stands a well known statue of justice, blindfolded and with a pair of balanced scales in one hand, an historic symbol of impartial justice that the courts beneath her are challenged to deliver. It occurs to me that if one substituted a blind person's cane for the scales she might represent a very good image of faith.

Faith, too, has a certain blindness. It always involves risk, but when it does the courageous thing it always brings a blessing.

It is hard to forget my very first funeral. I was still in college where on weekends I was student pastor of a tiny congregation called Frank Price Presbyterian Chapel, a little white shingled chapel in the middle of the corn fields in the flat lands of eastern North Carolina. The church was named after a missionary who had been home on furlough and was traveling by train in North Carolina when he met a young man named Alfred Sasser. Alfred was a deaf mute but Rev. Frank Price got to know enough about him to learn that in the rural area where Alfred lived there was no Presbyterian Church. So in Wilson, North Carolina, the good Reverend broke his journey, went to Black Creek where Alfred lived, and founded a Presbyterian congregation, first in a barn and later on a small plot of sandy land about a mile or so out of town.

The chapel was a ward of First Presbyterian Church in Wilson, about six miles away. And because I was an unordained undergraduate student, yet to go to seminary, the Session of First church dutifully sent out an elder each Sunday to make sure that I wasn't preaching anything too heretical. I was still, in a real sense, a layperson. One of those elders was Lieutenant Governor Jim ... of North Carolina, as if I needed more stress.

Seven months into my ministry at the chapel, Alfred Sasser died of cancer. He was just 48. I was terrified at the prospect of actually having to perform a funeral until I realized that as a student pastor, still untrained, I wouldn't be expected to. So I called The Rev. Larry Avent at First Church and passed on the news. Then the roof fell in. I didn't need to be ordained to perform a funeral, he said. Besides, I was Alfred's pastor, and—well, everyone has a first funeral. “Good luck!” he said, and with the offer of his library should I need some resources, he hung up. He wasn't being cruel or unkind, just realistic.

Now, in fear and trembling and with a sickness that felt close to my own demise, I prepared for my first funeral with much prayer and pouring over the little green service book, and I tried to piece together some characteristics of Alfred's life.

After the service was over the funeral director loomed up out of nowhere and tugged at

my arm. “Was that your first funeral?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, with a sigh of infinite relief.

“I thought so,” he said, not unkindly, and he slid back to his perch again in the shadows. But that didn’t matter; I made it, and we said farewell to a friend as we should. And what confidence it gave me having faced that challenge. My faith in putting together that first memorial service and funeral felt like tapping at the void with a white stick.

Many times we face the challenges of life and faith in Christ like the newly blind, tapping away at the perimeter of our fears on the edge of faith when circumstance places hard things before us. And when we stumble, bruised and awkward in the darkness after the voice of Jesus that says, “Come, follow me,” God applauds us, and dusts us off, and then invites us to take another step—perhaps a harder one.

It’s hard for all of us to venture into the unknown, into personally uncharted territory. The Gospel writers understand this, none more intimately than John’s Gospel. The character of this, the fourth Gospel, reflects a good deal of its circumstances. It reads differently from the other three Gospels. *John’s Gospel*. It appears to come out of a sectarian fellowship that retreated from persecution to become insular, surrounded by enemies and largely cut off from other Christian groups. Their leader, the mysterious, unnamed “Beloved Disciple,” seems to have had particular access to Jesus and to have been at least equal to Peter in the eyes of his followers. But the community that created this Gospel, with its very distinctive interpretation of Jesus, faced a dilemma. As time passed and worried them with an uncertain future, the fellowship was forced to die out or courageously break out into a hostile world. With Jesus’ anticipated second coming long delayed they must have felt as one blind, on a journey, armed only with a tremulous faith and a white tipped cane.

The Gospel originally finished its story with chapter 20 (something my own research recently confirmed), but some member of the community, conscious of their dilemma, added the material in chapter 21 that *challenges* the community to face the future by engaging the world and finishing the work that Jesus started. They feel assured that Jesus will be with them in the Spirit, but they are still anxious, like the newly blind stepping out with a guide that does not speak to them directly, and tapping a cane in the darkness. These are the very fears that chapter 21 addresses.

It was easier to believe when Jesus stood before them, radiant with quiet confidence, his physical person drawing them like filings to a magnet. “Follow me,” said Jesus—and then, paradoxically, he disappeared from their sight. It has been that way for the church ever since. But what a gift came out of that courage, and what inspiration their Gospel of Christ gave to the church ever after!

Here in these closing stories of the Gospel, after the resurrection, we find the disciples huddling for spiritual security in an upper room; we read of doubting Thomas—so representative of our honest fears—who will no longer believe what he cannot touch or see; and we learn of weary disciples fishing an unproductive lake, drifting out of hours of darkness with still empty nets. In these stories the Gospel is so conscious, so honest, so understanding of our sometimes fearful grappling with the unseen Christ of faith. The stories challenge the church—we disciples—to keep to that road and to the promise of reward, not with saccharine coated images of glory, but with promises of the hard road to a high kingdom, of being led where we do not wish to go, and yet, with courage, going there—because the work is too important to be set aside, and the souls of the earth are at stake.

What Jesus called his *disciples* Sir Francis Drake, the sixteenth-century English explorer

called his “crew.” There are similarities between him and Jesus, especially in the way each challenged his company for the journey that they faced. At the beginning of his early voyages, which included the first circumnavigation of the globe by an Englishman, Drake gathered young men on Plymouth Hoe overlooking the English Channel and the harbor, and told them of the glorious sights that they would experience: the spectacular artistry of nature; the rosie-fingered dawns and fiery sunsets; and the mystique of distant places. But few of them ever signed up.

So Drake changed his tactics. He began to tell them instead of the hardships they would endure: of winds that would roar like the breath of a tiger and beat them off course for days and even weeks on end; of days of desperate isolation, lost on a fathomless, rimless sea. He told of interminable days without fresh water and food when they would chew on ship’s leather or a rope’s end for sustenance. He told them of hostile landfalls and still more hostile people. He told them that they would not see their friends and loved ones for three or four years. Then he would say, “If you can handle these things, then I will tell you that the rewards of exploration, the rewards of courage, are beyond your wildest imaginings.” There are accounts that upon hearing these words there were boys and young men who never even went home to tell their families goodbye. They simply signed up.

The impulse to become insular with our faith is still with us. Not, to be sure, out of fear of overt persecution, like the Johannine Christians, but perhaps now out of too little confidence. We seem uncertain of what we do believe, how to express it, and how to make it relevant.

There is always a certain blindness to faith, which—if you’ll pardon the obvious—is why we call it faith. And so I challenge you to discover how to articulate *your* faith. How, to put it crassly, would you “sell it” if your or another’s life depended on it?—for in truth, they do! If, for example, because of some impending crisis it became vitally important to you to tell your child, or a loved one, or your dearest friend what you believed, and why—and you had to tell them quickly—what would you say? Would you tell them of the security that you feel when planted on a rock that stands among the shifting sands of time? Would you tell them that life is hard but that closeness to God eases the hardship? Could you tell them what salvation means—a feeling of being embraced by God when nothing else answers? Perhaps would you tell them of just feeling loved by God, and that you want that for them, too?

What would you say? We, too, are required to challenge and inspire each other to undiscovered landfalls in the kingdom of God. This is, after all, how the church survives. There is a work to be done that is too important to be set aside. Too much is at stake for those we love, and so much has been invested already—even unto death! If you doubt that, look at the little memorial book in the glass cabinet, at the back of this sanctuary.

At the height of his considerable fame in 1922, Giacomo Puccini, the brilliantly successful operatic composer of *Madame Butterfly*, *La Boheme*, and *La Tosca*, was stricken with cancer.

“I want to write one more opera,” he declared. And so he set about the score of *Turandot*. His students said, “But suppose you die?”

“Never care,” Puccini replied, “you will finish it.”

In 1924 Puccini died and his disciples did finish the music. The opera’s premiere was held at La Scala in Milan under the baton of Puccini’s best student, the legendary Arturo Toscanini. The gala performance proceeded and moved toward that point in the music where the composer laid down his pen for the last time. Tears welling in his face, Toscanini put down his baton, turned to the audience, and said, “Thus far, the master wrote . . . and then the master died.”

Then picking up the baton, his face suddenly wreathed in smiles, Toscanini shouted to the audience, "But his disciples finished his music." Amen.