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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

February 25, 2024

Year B, 2 Lent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16](#)

[Romans 4:13-25](#)

[Mark 8:31-38](#)

[Psalm 22:22-30](#)

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There are three feast days in the church year that fall on the three days right after Christmas and are traditionally called the “Companions of Christ”: the feast of St. Stephen on December 26th, the feast of St. John on the 27th, and the feast of the Holy Innocents on the 28th. And it’s often pointed out that these three days commemorate three kinds of martyrdom. St. Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian faith, the first person, after Jesus himself, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and go willingly to his death for his faith, forgiving his enemies; a martyr in both will and in deed. The Holy Innocents were the children killed by the wicked King Herod when he heard a new king had been born. They were martyrs not in will but in deed; they did not choose to die but had it inflicted on them through the violence of another. And St. John, at least in the church’s tradition, was a martyr in will but not in deed. In other words, he testified freely to his faith, and would have been willing to die for Christ, but wasn’t called to that particular fate and died peacefully in Christ at a ripe old age.

It can seem a little jarring to celebrate martyrdom in the Christmas season, surrounded by hot apple cider and freshly-unwrapped presents. But those three feast days show us that the manger and the cross are connected; that the one who comes to us as the child of Bethlehem is also the one who calls us to take up our cross and follow him. And now in this season of Lent that call comes to the foreground—a call that comes to each of us, as it did to those first disciples.

“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” There are still those today whose answer to that call ends up being quite literal. Today after the 10:15 service we will gather to read and study the words of a 20th-century martyr, Dr. Martin Luther King. We’ll be reading his Letter from Birmingham Jail from 1963, which called on a complacent white church to stop reinforcing the status quo. But we could equally well read his mountaintop speech from April 3, 1968, when he spoke seeming prophetically of the threats to his life from what he called “some of our sick white brothers” and said “Like everybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will.” The next day his witness was sealed by his martyrdom at the hands of one of those sick white brothers.

Last week we saw another modern example of a similar kind of moral courage as the Russian democratic activist Aleksei Navalny died in an Arctic prison camp in Siberia. In 2020 the Russian authorities tried to poison him with a nerve agent, and he almost died. After being treated in Germany he decided to return to Russia, knowing he was risking arrest and even death.

Not everybody will agree with all of Navalny's politics. He's been criticized for allying with Russian nationalist and anti-minority groups in the past. But what's clear is the moral power of his courage and his willingness to stand nonviolently against a violent power, to suffer if necessary, even at the cost of his life.

Navalny was motivated, among other things, by his faith. He had been a militant atheist, but as an adult became a convert to Russian Orthodoxy. In one of his many trials, in 2021, he spoke about his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." "It's not always easy to follow this scripture," he said, "but I am actually trying. And so while certainly not enjoying the place where I am, I have no regrets about coming back or about what I'm doing. On the contrary, I feel a real kind of satisfaction, because at a difficult moment I did as the instructions said and didn't betray the commandment."¹

Not all willingness to die is moral courage, of course. The young men of Hamas who surged out of Gaza on October 7 in jeeps and paragliders and stormed into Israel to murder civilians thought of themselves as martyrs, and indeed they were willing to die for a cause—but it was a cause of hate and atrocity, the opposite of the way of the cross. Since then we have seen a brutal retribution, the near-complete destruction of Gaza, homes and hospitals destroyed, as the children of Abraham, whose covenant story we heard this morning, are pitted against one another once more. Here the martyrs are more like the Holy Innocents, those whose martyrdom came through no choice of their own but through the unjust

¹ Russell Moore, "What a Murdered Russian Dissident Can Teach Us About Moral Courage," *Christianity Today* (February 21, 2024), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2024/february-web-only/alexei-navalny-russell-moore-putin-russia-moral-courage.html>. For the original trial transcript, see <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/02/20/rossiya-dolzha-byt-ne-tolko-svobodnoy-no-i-schastlivoy>.

violence of others, martyrs in deed though not in will: children as well as adults, Israelis, Palestinians, and foreigners, more than 1,000 Israelis and migrant workers whose lives were cut short by a sudden attack, more than 20,000 Palestinians whose lives have been cut short by a war of retaliation.

There are too many innocents in our world today, as there have been throughout the ages: innocents in Sudan and Yemen, in Myanmar and Mexico, in Ukraine and Colombia, and of course here at home too, in a country where we are not surrounded by the ravages of war but where gun violence and domestic violence and other forms of our human brokenness claim their share of victims each day.

So then we come to the third martyrdom, the martyrdom of St. John; which of course in the literal sense was no martyrdom at all. And of course most of us would probably hope to be called to this third martyrdom. I know I would. I admire Dr. King and Mr. Navalny. I weep and rage for the innocents of the Holy Land and so many other places. But I would rather live like John to a good old age and die in my bed. Of course the challenge is we don't actually get to choose, and for each of us there may be the possibility, however remote, that we may someday be called upon to hold fast to truth, to integrity, to the way of Christ, even if it should cost us pain or shame or life itself. But the other challenge is that if we're not called to those dramatic paths, the world around us can be so enticing, and it can be hard to see with clarity what we can rightly say yes to and what our faith demands we say no to. Which is one of the reasons we need this Lenten season, a season that asks us to live more simply, to be mindful about the choices we make, the resources we consume, how much we truly need and what we can give to others, how we spend our time.

There's a line I love in one of the eucharistic prefaces we use during Lent. Listen for it today during the eucharistic prayer: "By Christ's grace we are able to live no longer for ourselves alone, but for him who died for us and rose again." *To live no longer for ourselves alone.* That is the martyrdom of desire, the martyrdom of St. John, the martyrdom we are all called to: to *live*, and to do it *not for ourselves alone*, but for Christ, which is also to say for one another, because he includes with himself always those whom he loves.

May this holy season be a time for each of us to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, and find it none other than the way of life.