

Do what you are doing.

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

When I was a teenager I was very active in a Catholic youth retreat program called Search for Christian Maturity. It included powerful weekend retreats led by teams of youth and adult leaders, as well as a priest. All would give talks or witness about their faith journey.

On one of these Search retreats, the priest who accompanied us was Fr. Paul Schindler, a local pastor. He had recently returned to the diocese of Cleveland after spending many years as the head of the diocesan mission team in El Salvador. He was there in 1980 when three religious sisters and a lay woman who were also missionaries there— Ita Ford, Maureen Clark, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, were brutally murdered by agents of the El Salvadoran military. Fr. Schindler found their bodies. It was a decisive moment in the long period of violence and human rights abuses against the people of El Salvador. Fr. Schindler was reassigned to Cleveland soon after because there was a price on his head, as well.

A few years later, at our retreat, Fr. Schindler told us of his work in El Salvador and the beauty of the people there, of their hope and their faith and their struggles. We knew his story; Jean Donovan and Sr. Dorothy Kazel were from our diocese and were counted as local martyrs. Many young people at the time wanted to travel to El Salvador to work with the poor and challenge the injustices there.

But Fr. Schindler ended his witness with the call for us to “do what you are doing.” He was not calling us to be missionaries, or to travel to another country to live our faith. Do your faith right now, where you are, he said. Once we left our weekend at Camp Christopher, doing what we were doing before we got there didn’t sound very world-changing.

Because what we were doing was going to school. We were starting relationships and making friends. Some of us were preparing to leave our families for our first jobs or discerning lives in ministry. And because of these retreats, and the witness of Christians around us like Fr. Schindler, we were burning with the love of Jesus and its impact in our lives. And we wanted to do something powerful with it.

Do what you are doing as followers of Jesus, Fr. Schindler said. The work is right at hand.

And that is the answer that Jesus himself gives in today’s Gospel from Luke, when some of his allies warn him that Herod might be seeking his life. In response Jesus essentially says, if Herod is looking for me, he’ll find me right here doing what I’m doing. And I’ll be doing it “today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.”

Today, tomorrow and the third day are Jesus' shorthand for the journey that he is on, which he knows will end in Jerusalem at the high holy days. "Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

Jesus began his long walk to Jerusalem in the 9th chapter of Luke's Gospel, when he realized that was the place where the arc of his ministry was taking him. So he "set his face toward Jerusalem." But he didn't drop everything to move his ministry there. His work – the healing of the sick, the casting out of demons and the proclaiming of the Kingdom of God, would continue apace as he drew nearer and nearer to the events that would complete it.

"It's heaven all the way to heaven, because Jesus is the way," St Catherine of Sienna was known to say. And for Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, it's the kingdom of God all the way to Kingdom of God. And that is what he does along the way – he proclaims and reveals God's Kingdom – where brokenness is healed, and the source of the breach is defeated over and over again. His stories along the way all tell of the impossible inbreaking of God's powerful agenda.

When we get to today's passage from the 13th chapter of Luke, Jesus is still a long way from Jerusalem. He is in the region of Palestine controlled by Herod Antipas. Herod's family had been placed as quasi rulers of the people of Isreal by Ceasar. They don't have much legitimacy in the eyes of the people of Galilee, including Jesus. Herod is not to be trusted – he is fascinated by prophetic figures like John the Baptist and Jesus. But he also had John beheaded during a family party. Luke mentions that Herod was hoping to arrange some one-on-one time with Jesus. Local Pharisees warn Jesus that he isn't safe, that Herod is likely seeking his life.

Jesus knows that his life will not end with Herod, even though he is a fox that is nosing about the henhouse. So today and tomorrow Jesus plans to do what he is doing, bringing about the kingdom of God all the way to the Kingdom of God. But Jerusalem is always on his mind.

Last Sunday, our Gospel was about the devil testing Jesus on whether he relied entirely on God for his food, his life and his destination. That story occurred at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, several chapters before Jesus set his face on Jerusalem.

But I wonder if Jesus sees Jerusalem as the place where his own people will be tested by what Jesus was bringing to them – would they trust Jesus as the one from God bringing the bread of God's life to them in new ways? Would they recognize God's covenant with them in the ways Jesus healed them and in his defeat of the evil one who sought to enslave them – as Jesus cast out demon after demon along the way?

Jerusalem is the location where mighty tests will happen. It will be the place where Jesus will again be tested by his weaknesses and the challenge to his own resolve. It will also be place of testing for his followers, who will see many of their hopes dashed, and who will abandon Jesus at crucial moments. And it hold a test for Jesus' own people, Isreal. Will they recognized God's will in Jesus' message and actions? Or will they reject that relationship?

It's important to remember that Jesus' last word, his last act as he dies, and perhaps his most important gift for all of us who are weak in faith – is the offer of forgiveness.

But we are not there yet. That is the work of the third day, and we still have all of Lent to go before we arrive there with Jesus.

This is what we know about Jesus on this day in his 10-chapter journey to Jerusalem: he is unafraid of the threats around him, his mind and heart are still set, and he loves and worries over his people, who maybe don't realize what is at stake for them. All along the way he has desired to gather them like a mother hen gathers her chicks close to her body when a fox like Herod, or Ceasar, or even the chicks' own stupidity threaten them. And yet Jesus has already felt the rejection of his message, the scattering of some, even as others gather close to him. You can hear his lament in the words "Jerusalem, Jerusalem..."

He knows his people's long struggle with their covenant with God, and what they have done to those who have pointed out its short falls. And he knows that people of great faith, like his parents, and his followers, have also hungered and thirsted and yearned for God's healing presence. That's why Jesus is doing what he is doing after all.

On this second Sunday of Lent, on our Journey to Jerusalem, we are invited to follow Jesus' lead in proclaiming the Kingdom all the way to the Kingdom, to keep doing what we are doing in the name of Christ.

What we are doing today, is worshipping God who brought us to this place through Jesus. It's a powerful thing, especially when foxes are nosing about the hen house and the chicks are foolishly running from safety. In this act of joyous and hopeful worship, our God gathers us and feeds us and strengthens for this journey. It's like huddling under the wing of God, and part of our work today is inviting people to gather with us in this safe and loving place.

And that means continuing to ensure that St. Peter's is a place of welcome, and healing and wholeness for any who are threatened by the Herods and Ceasars and false prophets of our time.

What does tomorrow look like? It looks like the work we do along the paths that lead out of these doors and into the rest of the week, with our hope on the tip of our tongues, should anyone ask, and with Jesus's gifts of justice, healing and forgiveness at the ready. It looks like love instead of hatred. Humility instead of arrogance. Service instead of oppression. Mercy instead of cruelty.

And what does the third day look like? How will we know when we arrive in Jerusalem? It will look like Holy Week at first. It will contain the humble foot washing of Maundy Thursday and the disorienting darkness of Good Friday. But we must also remember that on the third day Jesus rose from the dead.

Easter my dear ones is where our Lenten journey ends and our new life begins, the reason why we followers of Jesus are doing what we are doing. Amen.