

February 28, 2010----Second Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 12: 1-6, Luke 13: 31-35

## Walking into Danger

I have been watching the Olympics a lot. I am fascinated by the spectacle and by the risks that some people take in the name of competition! Time after time, the athletes take huge risks, going all out in an effort to win a medal.

The more extreme sports involve a lot of flying up into the air, flipping and twisting and turning, or else going ridiculously fast with not very much between body and snow or ice.

How do they do that? WHY do they do that?

What possesses a person to head down a hill at breakneck speed and then not only fly off a ski jump but twist and turn and flip, and then hope to land upright?

Or on a snowboard, flying up above the halfpipe and narrowly missing (and sometimes hitting!) the icy edge on the way down. The higher, the better! The more flipping over and over the better!

One interview I saw echoed my feelings-----the interviewer asked first, pretty much "Are you crazy??" and then "Aren't you afraid?"

"Of course we are all afraid," came the answer, "but we do it anyway. We know it's dangerous, but that's what we do"---race or ski or skate or snowboard our way right into danger!

Reading the scripture from the Gospel according to Luke, I see Jesus doing the same thing.

No, not on skis or skates, of course, but heading right into danger.

Some Pharisees, believe it or not, actually came to Jesus to warn him of danger. We usually think of Pharisees as hypocritical, judgmental people, but there were Pharisees who were sympathetic to Jesus, and

A fox: a doglike animal that was not particularly dangerous. Known for such things as raiding the henhouse in the middle of the night. Not strong and courageous. Not particularly dangerous compared with wolves and lions.

Jesus' tone is one of contempt. "You tell that fox, that worthless dog of a man that I will continue doing what I came to do and heading for Jerusalem." He wanted Herod to know that he was not going to be scared off by threats. He was going to face the danger head on.

But it wouldn't be Herod who killed him, he said. It would be Jerusalem itself.

He weeps over Jerusalem. He weeps for the loss of the holiness of the Holy City, for the city that would reject him even though he was the one they were waiting for, the Messiah.

It wouldn't be the first time that Jerusalem had rejected a prophet, and Jesus reminds them of that. He says "How often did I reach out to you, how many times did I try to gather you into my loving arms, gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not!"

"You would not return to God. You would not listen to the words the prophets spoke and now you will reject Jesus, the Word of God!"

Jesus walked into danger because there was nothing to be afraid of. The worst that could happen was that he would die, and he already knew that would happen.

What he also knew was that death wasn't going to win in the end, that he would walk out of the tomb, defeating death forever.

If the Olympic athletes knew that even if they fell they would get up and still win, that no matter how badly they crashed and how serious the injuries were, they would still take home the gold, that the injuries would heal quickly, say in three days, would they be as afraid?

I don't think so.

So Jesus faced danger head on. But what about us?

We say we believe in life after death, that in Christ we have eternal life.

So we must not fear death, right?

But maybe we do. It seems like we can't avoid it. It is part of the human condition that we all die, that is, to this life.

Isn't it time we said, "Tell Herod, tell death, he doesn't scare us! There is nothing that can defeat the God that we worship, not even death! Not anything!"

There are many other things we're afraid of besides death. We fear loneliness, we fear that our lives will have no meaning, we fear losing our capabilities, our strength, and our health.

What would you do if you were not afraid? Is a question that we sometimes hear.

But I think a better question is, “What will we do even when we ARE afraid?”

I am not entirely convinced that Jesus was really not afraid of dying. Probably he was more afraid of the pain that would come before he died than he was of death itself. We know that he prayed desperately for God to change the inevitable, to “take this cup” away from him so that he would not have to die a tortured death on the cross.

If he was afraid, that’s understandable. He was human, after all. He felt pain, just like we do.

And he had a choice, just like we do.

When we are afraid, scientists tell us, our response is either fight or flight. We lash out, fighting, or we take flight, we run away.



Jesus was warned to run away, but he didn't. He chose to follow God's call and so he headed straight toward Jerusalem, straight toward the cross! "Not my will, but yours, be done" are his words at the end of his passionate prayer in Gethsemane.

God often calls us toward something we're afraid of. A lot of the time, we choose to run away, to be disobedient, to stay safe. Safe from change, from stepping out of our familiar comfort zones, from doing anything new that we might not be experienced at.

We can make a different choice. We can choose to stay "in it to win it"---to stay and fight like Jesus did.

Jesus chose not to run away, so physiologically speaking, he chose to fight. So we hear him say, "You tell that old fox I'm not going anywhere."

What do we say? Who do we put on notice that we're not going to run away? Who is our "old fox"? And who are our Pharisees, warning us, tempting us! for the sake of safety, to run away?

I think if we think about what it is that we are afraid of doing in this life, then we will have a big clue to what it is that we are called to do. Sometimes it's hard for us to know what God wants us to do, and the answer can sometimes be found right in the middle of our fears.

Right in the middle of our fears. One thing that we fear more than anything is failure. We can't stand the idea that we might work very hard, put it all out on the line, invest so much of ourselves in doing something, only to have it all fall apart and be for nothing. We don't want to be embarrassed or look like a fool.

So we don't even try. We don't even start. We run away. And what we are running away from is the very thing that is most important to us! Because if we didn't care so much, failure wouldn't frighten us so much!

It's not much of an investment of our time and effort if we don't really care about what we're doing. Failure doesn't mean such a big let-down, such a big disappointment, if we don't care that much one way or another.

What scares us is failing at something that means a lot to us! Because then it's not only embarrassing but we are responsible for the collapse of our own dream, our own vision of the way things should be. And that can be heart-breaking.

Better not to get our hopes up than to see them fall right off the slalom course. Better not to spend time and effort working on the dream than to get hurt seeing it all come to nothing.

So what do we do? After all, if we don't try, what we care so much about doesn't happen, either!

We can remember that we always have a choice! We can choose to run away when we are afraid, or we can choose to fight our way through, to keep on going even when we are afraid!

We can look our fears in the face and head straight toward them, pumping our fists and shouting as we start down the mountain toward danger, “You old fox! You can’t stop me! I will keep on doing what God calls me to do, what is in my heart to do! Because there’s nothing in what fear is telling me that is more important than my goal, my dream, my vision.” The vision that God has put into my heart.

We can face all of our fears and blow right through them at breakneck speed, or we can face them and confidently walk our way through them, persevering through hardships and obstacles. The one thing we must not do is run away.

Jesus didn’t run away for the sake of our salvation, and we are trying to follow his example.

But it's hard for us. We are not as strong as Jesus, and we give in to the temptation of running away from our fears much too often.

Even when he tries to gather us together under his wings, in the shelter of his love, under his protection, we do not come to him. Instead we run in circles trying to escape our fears by staying out in the open!

We are no different from Jerusalem----unwilling to come to the safety and shelter of Christ. Unwilling to listen to the wise words of the prophets such as Isaiah to trust in God alone for our salvation!

Unwilling to trust God to take care of us in our fears, unwilling to believe that God will stand with us if we choose to stand and fight our way through our fears to do amazing things in our pilgrimage to follow Christ.

How DO we find the courage to fight our fears?

The answer to that question is the same answer I have for everything-----spend time with God. Read, study, pray, worship.

We wouldn't expect Olympic athletes to be able to face their fears and take the incredible risks they take without any training, any practice, or any coaching whatsoever!

In the same way, we cannot face our fears if we come up to them without any preparation. The way we build ourselves up to be able to choose to face down our fears and call out the "foxes" that threaten us is to spend time learning what other people have done (by reading the Bible),

by learning how the Bible relates to modern-day living (by reading books that make relevant connections between the Bible and today), by spending time in the presence of God and Christ (by worshipping and by praying).

I would add one more way to be strong enough to face fear, and that's by spending time in fellowship with other Christians. We, as the Body of Christ, can encourage each other, build each other up, and unite our intentions in one common goal, one common vision.

In this way, we will tell the foxes that are our fears that they are not in charge of us. God is. And with God as our guide, our shelter, and our salvation, we will move forward right through our fears. We will win the gold medal. And we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.



