

“A FACE SET LIKE FLINT”

Isaiah 50:4-9a

If the name Rosa Parks is not familiar to you, it should be. Rosa came to be known as the “first lady of civil rights” and “the mother of the freedom movement.” She was arrested on December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama for not giving up her seat in the colored section of a bus to a white man. Boycotts and protests followed. Eventually the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation is unconstitutional. After her death she received the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her courageous act. In the book *Quiet Strength* she says:

I have learned over the years that knowing what must be done does away with fear. When I sat down on the bus that day, I had no idea history was being made – I was only thinking of getting home. But I had made up my mind. After so many years of the mistreatment my people had suffered, not giving up my seat – and whatever I had to face afterwards – was not important. I did not feel any fear sitting there. I felt the Lord would give me the strength to endure whatever I had to face. It was time for someone to stand up – or in my case to sit down. So, I refused to move.

Rosa settled in her mind and heart what was right and resolved to do right for herself and others. Courage was the result.

Jesus settled in his mind and heart what had to be done and he found the courage and resolve to do so, as well. In fact, his resolve was how Rosa found hers. Her faith empowered her life. The Lord gave her the strength she needed. Isaiah’s telling of the “Suffering Servant,” when applied to Jesus and his Holy Week experience, gives important information about Jesus’ resolve. It provided a role model for Rosa and for us. It calls us to find the courage to do right, even when it puts us in danger.

Isaiah quotes the Servant:

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like flint.

These verses remind us of the need Jesus felt to exercise firm resolve.

“I have set my face like flint and I know I will not be put to shame.” At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry he spent 40 days in the wilderness contemplating how he would fulfill his mission. It was a time of moral and emotional struggle for him. He fasted for the 40 days and he was severely tempted to eat by conjuring up some bread. Remember what the devil said to him? *“Turn these stones into bread, if you are the Son of God.”* He refused. As he reflected on things to come and the probable outcome of his mission, death, he was tempted to avoid suffering and pain. The devil said he could accomplish it all by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple. He did not succumb.

The temptation to take the easy way accompanied Jesus throughout his life. It was most insistent during what we call Holy Week. On the Thursday night of Holy Week, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he fought off the urge to avoid the cross that was coming on Friday. He needed to harden his resolve to *“set his face like flint.”* He had to set his sights on a trial, humiliation, beating, spit on his face, and nails in his body on a cross. Naturally, he recoiled. The reality of his temptation and his resolve is expressed in his prayer: *“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will be done but yours.”*

Jesus stayed obedient to his call despite cruel opposition. He suffered as God’s servant because his message upset the political, religious, and social status quo. His suffering included physical and emotional abuse of the worst sort. Yet he exercised tremendous resolve through it all. Like Rosa Parks, knowing what had to be done did away with fear.

In Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there is an old woman dying of cancer. She is a model of courage and resolve. Her name is Mrs. Dubose. She has been a bitter critic of Atticus for his insistence for equal rights for blacks in that small southern town. So, Jem, Atticus' son, hates the old woman for criticizing his father. But Atticus wants Jem to see the greatness in this cantankerous old woman. For years she had taken morphine at her doctor's orders to ease her pain; eventually she became addicted. As it became apparent her days were numbered, she determined to escape her addiction to morphine before she died. She determined she would die "beholden to nothing and nobody." At Atticus' insistence, Jem read to Mrs. Dubose every day and watched her day by day as she endured the pain of not taking morphine. After her death, Atticus said to Jem, "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. Courage is when you know you are licked before you begin, but you begin anyway, and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all 98 pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew." She was courage and resolute.

Jesus faced Holy Week knowing his enemies were going to kill him; but he saw it through no matter what. He set his face like flint. Through tremendous courage born of his faith in the Father, he found the resolve to fulfill his calling. The call today to us, who face much less opposition not to mention threats, is to resist distraction and harden our resolve to be God's faithful people here and now no matter what.

Jesus endured, like Isaiah's Suffering Servant, because of his trust in God's presence and fidelity. The Servant declares: "*The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been confounded; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know I shall not be put to shame; God who vindicates me is near.*" Jesus' acts of personal courage were possible because of his

confidence in the God who is near. This faith fed his heroic resistance of temptation and his immovable resolve.

It was in the late 1930s and Germany was in turmoil. There was in Germany an “underground” resistance to Hitler and Nazism. The time came when a group of officials, intellectuals, army officers, church leaders attempted to undermine Hitler’s control. However, they found themselves baffled by the Allied leadership which was playing into Hitler’s hands. They were disheartened and tempted to flee. But they decided they could not run and leave it to the world to restore order, justice, and decency to Germany. They resolutely remained and most of them paid with their lives.

These Germans set their faces like flint, and, while their efforts were limited, their names are listed among the brave martyrs of WWII. One of them, a general, wrote to his son:

To our last breath we all remain upstanding men, as we were taught from childhood and in our soldierly discipline. Come what may, we fear only the wrath of God that will fall upon us, if we are not clean and decent and do our duty.

Of this general, someone wrote: “He remained firm within himself and his firmness sprang from his unshakeable faith in God.”

The call for us is to be Christians centered upon the God seen in the face of Jesus. As 2 Corinthians says: *“God has made his light shine in our hearts so that we could know the glory of God that shines in the face of Jesus.”* This face, that Jesus set like flint, will enable us to do the will of God in the way of Jesus and stand against pressure and distraction. The call is for us to move our homes, neighborhoods, and communities toward Jesus and into God’s purposes. What needs to be done here to make this a more godly community? What can we do to make life more gracious for more people? What is not being done that we could do? When will we do it?

Today begins Holy Week. This is the week we remember that Jesus, like the German underground, voluntarily accepted his role as Suffering Servant. This role is being shared around the world by pastors, missionaries, and everyday Christians who have remained in communist and Muslim nations and still worship and carry forth their God-given mission. According to the Pew Research Center 75% of the world's people live in places of religious restriction, many of them are Christians. According the US State Department in over 60 countries, Christians face persecution for admitting their faith. Beatings, torture, isolation, confinement, rape, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment are not uncommon. Go to www.opendoorsusa.org for full information. Some fall away and give up the faith, but most do not. They are able to repeat the Servant's song: *"He who vindicates me is near...Behold, the Lord helps me."*

While we do not now face such atrocities, when we seek to do God's will, we can face insult, conflict, and social ostracism for doing so. When we stand against racism, pollution, drugs, violence, abuse, and exploitation – and when we stand for fairness, the environment, good government, justice for immigrants, and affordable health care – we will be opposed. But, the promise is that when our nerve wavers, Jesus is more than an example, he is our source of courage. He'll send his Holy Spirit to us as he did to Rosa Parks. With Paul we can say: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* This does not mean we can do anything, anywhere, anytime. It means that when we are in God's will, we will like Parks, know what needs to be done and do so without paralyzing fear. We too will be able to set our faces like flint and join Jesus in courageous resolve to build the kingdom of God in that portion of the world in which we live.

So, today we begin the most sacred week of the year, Holy Week. This week reminds us of all God did for us in Christ. It calls us to consider all that we in Christ can do for God. Right here in Tampa Bay we can be

God's servants too. And with Isaiah's Suffering Servant, we can say: WE SHALL NOT BE PUT TO SHAME FOR THE ONE WHO VINDICATES US IS NEAR.