

March 17, 2019
Second Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

We're long past Christmas, but this week I was thinking about the now-classic film *A Christmas Story*. Released in the 1980s but set in the 1940s, *A Christmas Story* is a comedically nostalgic look at Christmas, as seen through the eyes of a boy whose deepest wish is that Santa bring him a Red Rider Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model air rifle—and to which every adult in his life responds, “You’ll shoot your eye out!”

Today's Gospel reading reminded me of a particular scene from that film. There is snow on the ground, and our protagonist, Ralphie, his younger brother, and his two best friends are walking home from their neighborhood elementary school. They are meandering down an alley when, suddenly, from the other side of a wooden fence, comes menacing laughter. Notice the music, and you'll hear the wolf from Prokofiev's *Peter & the Wolf*. Soon our innocent lambs are set upon by meanie Scut Farkus and his sidekick Grover Dill. In sardonic voice-over, the adult Ralphie opines, “In our world, you were either a bully, a toady, or one of the nameless rabble of victims.”¹

“In our world, you were either a bully, a toady, or one of the nameless rabble of victims.” That line sure does resonate. But even in the movie, it turns out *not* to be quite true. On another walk home from school, faced yet again with that taunting bully, Ralphie literally loses his mind. Ralphie's pent-up fear and rage and frustration pour out and onto the stunned Scut Farkus. Ralphie tackles him, sits on him, and proceeds to pound the dickens out of him while babbling a stream of obscenities. A gaggle of school kids watch in frozen mortification. Scut Farkus is powerless in the face of such raw emotion. As the voice-over adult Ralphie describes it, “Something had happened. A fuse blew, and I had gone out of my skull.”²

Ralphie's little brother runs off to fetch their mother, who shakes Ralphie out of his violent trance. Ralphie collapses in tears. His mother consoles him and steers him home—leaving poor Scut Farkus lying in the snow. The bully gets his comeuppance, and from an unlikely quarter: an anti-bully in sheep's clothing.

I re-watched that scene in preparation for this sermon, and it sure was satisfying. Maybe that's because it feels some days as if the bullies and toadies are having their brazen way as never before. Some bullies and toadies ply their deeds in schoolyards, but it doesn't stop there or with childhood. Some occupy the most powerful government and corporate offices in America. Some work in college admissions. Some carry guns into churches, synagogues, and mosques.

Listening to the news, I feel like I might blow a fuse and go out of my skull. Occasionally I even want to pound the dickens out of someone, but all I get to do is babble a stream of obscenities. It's probably just as well. I don't *really* want to lose my mind.

To complicate things, if I step back and take an honest look at myself, sometimes *I'm* the bully. That's true in very direct ways; for example, I can be very impatient, with other people and with myself, and I don't always manage that impatience with kindness, for other people or for myself. It's also true in more systemic ways, through my participation in structures of injustice and oppression; for example, my white privilege de-privileges others, and I carry it with little notice that it's happening and less determination to fix it. My steps might as well be timed to Prokofiev's wolf music.

What's a person to do? In real life, physical or mental pummeling is seldom helpful. It generally just leads to more physical or mental pummeling. Hopefully there's a better way.

In today's Gospel, you might say that Jesus is on *his* way home: he's in the midst of the long journey upon which Luke sets him for his one trip to Jerusalem. The seat of the Jewish Temple and center of Hebrew life, Jerusalem is where Jesus will die, be buried, and rise again.

Jesus is on his way home, and popping up suddenly along the alley is that foxy bully Herod Antipas, who appears in absentia, courtesy of his toadies the Pharisees. Though it's not clear exactly what they're up to, it can't be good.

Herod has his own "nameless rabble" to bully around. When the privileged on the playground are choosing teams, these are the people who go *unclaimed* and *unnamed*: the poor; the sick; the powerless; the marginalized; the ones who just don't matter. Those are the people among whom Jesus has chosen to stand. But Jesus isn't unclaimed and unnamed; in fact, *God claimed* and *named* Jesus, twice in the Gospel of Luke: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."³ "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"⁴ Through Jesus, God claimed and named the others.

And so from the nameless rabble arises our own unlikely anti-bully in sheep's clothing. Claimed and named by God, Jesus doesn't need to tackle his taunters and beat them about the head and shoulders. After all, God has claimed and named them, too. Instead, he takes a different approach. Change must start with change. Feed the poor. Heal the sick. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love yourself.

Read the Gospel only as far as Good Friday, and Jesus will seem to have lost everything. You have to stick with it right on through Easter to discover just how right he was.

I should back up and say that today's Gospel passage is actually pretty cryptic; scholars don't agree about exactly what's going on with Herod and the Pharisees. Positioned here, the incident serves as a rhetorical device, to foreshadow Jesus' passion. That's why we hear it during Lent. During Lent, we journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, giving up old ways and taking on new ones.

During Lent, there's a lot of talk about sin. Some say that humans are so intrinsically sinful that Jesus *had* to die—his death was the only way for humans to get right with God. It goes back to Adam and especially Eve, whose transgression in the Garden of Eden started it all. Jesus had to pay the resulting debt quite personally, for me, for you, for everyone. Because each of us is sinful, each of us is culpable in Jesus' death.

That theory doesn't work for me. I tend to think that what's going on is more directly what the Gospel says is going on. Bullies and their toadies are up to no good. To put it another way, relationships are broken. Jesus brings a particular way of fixing things, a way was so radical that he died for it—but only temporarily.

Another word for all the ways in which relationships are broken is just plain *sin*. So much of the dynamic of sin goes back to the schoolyard, to deep-seated feelings of fear, inadequacy, or vulnerability. As it plays out, each of us is at times *sinner*, and at other times *sinned-against*. From either perspective, I suspect that remedy begins with remembering this: God claimed and named *you*. *You* are God's beloved child.

That certain knowledge gives us the strength to join Jesus as empowered us as members of club anti-bully, and to continue his work—uplifting the poor and the oppressed, healing and loving, spreading kindness and compassion. Jesus did it one person at a time, and so do we. It may not seem like much, but it's the only way change ever happens. It's not easy, and it's not cheap, but it *is* the way to new life, for us, and for the world. God claimed and named *you*. *You* are God's beloved child.

Notes

¹ *A Christmas Story*. directed by Bob Clark, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1983. At the time of this writing, the referenced clip was available online on YouTube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2l6RnWM2tU> (accessed March 14, 2019).

² *A Christmas Story*. At the time of this writing, the referenced clip was available online on YouTube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agOnqeEeXw> (accessed March 14, 2019).

³ Luke 3:17b, NRSV.

⁴ Luke 9:35b, NRSV.