

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
March 16, 2025

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" ~Luke 13:31-35

My old friend Dr. Newton sang alto in a choir I directed many years ago, about 20 miles south of here along the coastline. Dr Newton was one of those secret-weapon choral singers every director wants who had a bright, pure tone, could read anything, had impeccable pitch, and just loved choral music. If there was a choir within sixty miles she could join, she did, and she filled every weeknight with rehearsal. Her email address was lisasings@yahoo.com. One day we all learned to our shock that Dr. Newton had suffered a major health crisis. When she was able to speak, the first question she asked was whether she'd be able to keep singing in her choirs. She was told that immobility and paralysis would likely make it impossible. We were all devastated for her. I really shouldn't have been surprised, though, when, six weeks later, at a few minutes after 7 on a Wednesday evening, Dr. Newton appeared at the choir room door. She was a bit winded but when the room erupted into astonished and sustained applause she simply found her folder and chair, smiled and got ready to sing. What I'll never forget is that our rehearsal had actually started at 6:30. It was only later when I learned that she had spent the better part of that half hour climbing *the three flights* it required to get our choir loft, pausing for a minute or two after each step. Somehow, through sheer determination, through her unstoppable passion for singing, through her love for music and choir and for the group, she had gotten herself there.

I can't help but think of our own choir as I tell this story, and quite honestly, as I often tell them, I would happily say something about their music every week. It's just extraordinary and so deeply moving week after week. And we all know how much passion, devotion, dedication and love it all requires. We all know that talent is a wonderful and rather mysterious gift to be given but also that it's not what ultimately gets us there. It's countless hours, it's passion and it's love that makes possible what we hear here at St. Thomas's each Sunday morning.

What's interesting is to get to heart of this extraordinary passion, this sense of dedication and *faithfulness*, especially this morning as we have been steeped already in stories and images of deep faithfulness, from the prayer that began our service right through the rather enigmatic gospel passage we just heard from Luke. On this second Sunday in Lent, we've just been offered potent images of fortitude, of that determination and ability to keep the flame burning even when it seems impossible. And we are invited today deeply and in myriad ways into that which we call *faithfulness*, that dynamic, life-giving fire that fueled Sarah and Abraham as they came to know so deeply and intimately God's steadfast faithfulness, as they came to exchange promises with God,

promises of flourishing against all odds, promises of a burning divine companionship they believed to be inextinguishable.

And so the question for us today is: Just how do we cultivate that same flame, that same fire of faithfulness among and within ourselves in our own time? How do we rekindle and sustain those commitments we made just ten days ago on Ash Wednesday or last Sunday morning as strains of that glorious four-part-harmony litany swirled around us?

Our gospel this morning seems to make two suggestions.

First, the gospel suggests, we might take time this season to slow down and to listen for a sense of call — that we might pause in this holy season to listen for just what it is that fires our passion. I remember reading a history of Calvary Church in Stonington CT about ten years ago while writing a sermon for the parish's 175th birthday. The book was filled with interesting vignettes, none more so than the story of a series of scandals and setbacks that reduced their congregation in the 1930s to . . . *one* member. One. For the better part of a year, Anna came alone on Sundays and then again on early mornings through the week to pray, to read the day's liturgy and scripture; to keep the flame burning. Folks would peer in to see her kneeling, praying, lighting and extinguishing candles, dusting, sweeping and more. For a time she was seen as something of an eccentric until, through her devotedness, the parish began slowly to rebound. As the book recalls, when asked why and how she managed to continue on her own and for so long, she simply responded that she felt *someone had to* and that the Spirit had asked her. After reading her story, anytime I would enter the building on a quiet morning, I would think of her and her fierce, unlikely devotedness. And that sense that there was something special and all her own that was her call. *She sensed that the Spirit had asked her.*

In his brief, searing words in this morning's gospel, Jesus tells us something of this fierce call, this inextinguishable devotedness. As that fox Herod sows chaos and division, Jesus is warned to set all activity aside and seek his own safety. The religious leaders, so often cast in a negative light, look out for him here. If you're like me, you want him to heed their warning and save himself. But he can't, he tells us; his sense of call is simply too strong, too central to God's mission. It breaks our hearts to hear why. He's got too much healing to accomplish, too many folks to cure, too many of us to make whole, too many that seek his embrace, his touch. That's his call and it fuels him even in the face of danger.

And so finally today's passage suggests one thing more. Faithfulness, dedication, steadfastness — the fuel that sustained Sarah, Abraham, Anna and more — ignites in call and it endures in *love*. While that fox Herod scatters in fear and division, while his reckless paranoia and vindictiveness poison the public air, Jesus breathes love and protection as does *a mother hen for her brood*, in the image he offers so memorably. And so yes, in the face of noise and power moves, in the face of the domination system that divides soul against soul, he offers the only thing he knows can silence it, and overcome it, and overwhelm it, and that's love. It's the love, as he reminds us, that fuels his steadfast and steady journey toward Jerusalem, where he will give us the gift of himself, of his life, his body, soul and heart, all of it. For us.

And so back to us here and now in this place for a moment. Because it's love that fuels this fire for us too. It's love that fuels our musicians — love for music, for each other, for that moment of praise and glory that fills the air so thrillingly as the organ plays and the cross leads the way. It starts in call and it endures in love. I remember my best teacher in graduate school. She gave us assignments that seemed overwhelming at first, and we found ourselves asking her how we'd ever accomplish them. 20, 25, even 30-page papers. She said simply, "Choose something you love." She was right — once I found the project I loved, I was off, and the words flowed. Passion ignites and love sustains. We find ourselves in a world not unlike Jesus's world, in a time not unlike his of division. Of chaos. We want to heal, we want to make whole, we want to extend our healing touch. And perhaps today's gospel simply suggests that the call in this holy season is once again to listen for our call and know that love will sustain that call in each of us — that love will stoke and nurture it, that love will keep it aflame as it did for Sarah, Abraham and Anna, and as it has for countless pilgrims along the way, even you and me, here on a lovely, foggy day in New Haven on the threshold of spring in March, 2025. Thanks be to God. Amen.