



"Standing on the Shoulders of Giants"

Scripture – Luke 4:14-30

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, September 10, 2023

On a cold, moonlit night, March 13th, 1941, in western Scotland the German Luftwaffe was on a mission to cripple Britain's shipbuilding and manufacturing plants in Clydebank, outside of Glasgow. In the first wave, the aircrew must have been anxious to turn for home quickly because they unloaded their bombs well before reaching their target. One of those incendiary devices struck the wooden roof of the beautiful Bearsden Cross Parish. This congregation of the Church of Scotland had existed since 1874, but that night when the bomb hit the church roof, it caught fire. When daylight came only the outer shell of the church remained standing.

This was the Clydebank Blitz, and that night 528 people were killed and 12,000 were left homeless. Some may have turned to Psalm 74: "They set thy sanctuary on fire; to the ground they desecrated the dwelling place of thy name."

Nearby churches extended a welcome and for several years the congregation met in different churches. The shortage of labor and building materials prevented a new church from being built until 1952. That is where I preached in August while Doctor Graham Wilson was preaching at Westminster.

So why did I arrange a pulpit exchange with a pastor in the Church of Scotland? The answer begins back in the 1500s.

Corruption in the Roman Catholic Church sparked a religious movement we know as the Protestant Reformation. The monk, Martin Luther, kicked things off in Germany in 1517 when he protested some of the abuses occurring in the church. His ideas were embraced by others and quickly spread. The young French lawyer John Calvin was struck by Luther's ideas and fled Catholic Paris for Geneva, Switzerland.

Meanwhile John Knox was growing up in Haddington, Scotland, a town outside of Edinburgh. He was raised in Saint Mary's Catholic Church and sang in the choir. He showed great promise as a student and

attended St. Andrews College. Knox was ordained as a priest but did not serve a parish. Instead, he became a notary and a tutor.

When he was about 30, he heard a sermon by George Wishart, who had spent time in Germany and Switzerland where the Reformation ideas were spreading. Knox believed Wishart was a prophet and became convinced of the revolutionary ideas. After returning to Scotland, Wishart soon ran afoul of the Roman Catholic Church and was ordered to stop preaching. He refused. He believed he was called by God to bring the reformed ideas to Scotland.

The Archbishop of St. Andrews disagreed and was determined to silence Wishart. His life was in danger. Knox stopped functioning as a notary and became one of Wishart's bodyguards. He marched in front of Wishart with a huge two-handed sword that stood as high as a man's chest. John Knox was now a marked man, identified with Wishart as a heretic.

Wishart continued to preach, and it became obvious that his days were numbered. Then, on a cold January night, as men came to arrest Wishart, he told Knox to leave him, saying, "One is sufficient for a sacrifice."

Wishart was arrested and turned over to the archbishop. He was soon tried and convicted as a heretic and burned at the stake just outside of St. Andrews Castle. Knox kept a low profile knowing that he might be next. However, within a couple of months, some of Wishart's followers revenged his death. Early one morning, they broke into St. Andrews Castle, murdered Archbishop Beaton, and took control. Stay with me because you won't find this on Brit Box. Others joined them and soon there were 120 people occupying the castle. For his safety, Knox was encouraged to join them.

Within a few months, those in the castle recognized Knox as a leader and a gifted speaker. They called on him to begin preaching, but he refused. However, the pressure mounted on him to expose the corruption in the church and to espouse the ideals of the Reformation. Eventually, he relented.

A few months later, the French attacked the castle and took its occupiers as prisoners. Knox and others were put on ships and placed in chains and forced to row with other galley slaves. The rowing was punishing, and the rations were meager, and Knox nearly died. But after 19 months, he was set free and went to England where Archbishop Cranmer was promoting the Reformation. Knox was appointed as a preacher and what a courageous one he became.

In time, Knox went to Geneva to study under Calvin and when he returned to Scotland, he built a reputation as a fiery preacher who called on people to adhere to Biblical principles and he was determined to reform the church. He preached in congregations throughout Scotland, including his home church, St. Giles in Edinburgh. He was adamant about basing church practices on scripture and wanted the people to read the Bible, so he pushed hard for teaching everyone to read. And, of course, he famously argued with Mary Queen of Scots.

Although he was often criticized and threatened, Knox established the Church of Scotland. There would be no bishops, no Cardinals, and certainly no Pope. Rather, the church was to be governed by elders elected from the congregation. All people are equal in God's eyes, so no mediator between people and God is needed. This is known as the priesthood of all believers.

Two quotes reveal the opinions held about John Knox. The first was from someone who was a contemporary. He said: "[Knox] was most to blame for all of the troubles in Scotland since the murder of the Cardinal." The other came from Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish historian and philosopher who lived two centuries later and reflected on the Knox's influence. Carlyle said, "[Knox] is the one Scotchman to whom all others, his country, and the world owe a debt."¹ During the pulpit exchange, I took my grandson, Matthew **Knox** Burnside, to visit the home of John Knox in Edinburgh. What a special moment that was.

Scottish Presbyterians came to this land in the 1600s and 1700s. Since education was a preeminent value for them, they established some of the first schools and colleges. They were also very politically active. One-third of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian. And the only active member of the clergy to sign the Declaration was the Reverend John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian who became the president of one of the first schools established by Presbyterians – Princeton. Further, the government they established reflected their Church of Scotland government. Political leaders were not appointed; they were elected by the people.

It is important for us to remember some of the very courageous people on whose shoulders we stand today. People who risked their lives for the teachings of Scripture. I suspect today's Scripture reading might have been a favorite of Knox, but we have no way of knowing because he preached most sermons without any notes. And he preached for two to three hours. Don't worry, you're safe.

Today's text tells of a harrowing moment in the early days of the ministry of Jesus. He has returned to Nazareth for his first sermon in front of the hometown crowd. He had taught in other synagogues and word had reached the people that Jesus was astonishing folks with his wisdom. It was standing room only the day he preached. Jesus read from the 61st chapter of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

After he finished, he began to comment. He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, this is God's word to you now. The poor will be yanked from the bread lines and sit at banquet tables. Those who are captives of illness and injustice will dance in the town square. Those blinded by greed and fear will have their eyes opened. Those who are oppressed will have the knee pulled off their necks.

Luke says, "All spoke well of Jesus and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But Luke says it did not end there. Jesus pushed the boundaries of polite conversation. He illustrated his sermon with two stories that made it clear that when he spoke of bringing good news to

the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free, he was not merely saying that this is what God intends for our people. He gave two examples of foreigners to underscore that this is what God envisions for all people; even those they considered outsiders.

Jesus said, "There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah...and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow in Sidon." As if that were not enough to drive home his point, Jesus gave a second illustration that also stung. "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

That did it. Hometown boy or not, the people had heard enough. Luke writes, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which Nazareth was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff!" Somehow, Jesus escaped their clutches.

I suspect Wishart and Knox and other brave souls through the ages who held fast for Biblical principles in the face of fierce opposition, garnered strength from this story of Jesus. He spoke the truth, even when people did not want to hear it. He spoke the truth even when it put his life at risk.

We are living in difficult times, but we draw courage from reminding ourselves that we come from generations of principled, brave people determined to struggle for what is right and true and good. Our ancestors fought for freedom and justice, and God expects us to continue the struggle to spread God's realm on earth.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather its conscience...If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause people everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, if it will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will kindle people's imaginations and fire their souls, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace."

We are living in divisive times when truth and respect and justice and the common good are at risk. God surely expects us to stand firm against hate and lies and violence and greed. If you have the courage to follow the way of Jesus, you will find that the path is not always smooth. But you will find a life with depth and meaning, a life of love and satisfaction, a life of joy and hope, and a serenity in your soul that comes when your life is in harmony with our Creator. It's your call.

NOTES

1. *John Knox: Scotland's Great Reformer*, (Ditchling, Sussex: Pitkin Pictorials, 1990), p.1.

For much of my information on John Knox, I relied on: Jane Dawson, *John Knox*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015)