



## Sermons from Northwood United Church

**"Flint-faced hope"**

**Isaiah 50:4-9, Mark 11:1-11**

**Will Sparks**

**March 22, 2015**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As a child and as a boy scout I used to play with flint. Occasionally we had a survival challenge where we had a knife, a piece of flint and had to cook a meal. That was back in my early pyromaniac scouting days. Let's talk about flint for a moment.

Flint is a kind of stone: hard, brittle, can have a sharp edge, and when struck at the right angle creates a spark. You've got to watch it because flint has the potential to create fire.

"I have set my face like flint," says the writer of the third servant song within Isaiah. To set your face like flint is to set it hard and straight and direct. The Servant of Isaiah expects suffering, expects the path ahead will be difficult, and painful, and so, the servant musters courage, gathers all the internal resources available, resolves to move forward regardless of the suffering that might be involved, because the path ahead serves a greater purpose.

Amazing the parallels between the feeling of the servant of Isaiah and what Jesus faced in the gospels as he made his way toward Jerusalem. Knowing that all he said and did to usher in this Kingdom of God way of being ran counter to and opposed the Kingdom of Caesar, and Roman power, the closer he got to Jerusalem, the closer he came to the tinderbox, to the explosive possibilities, to the power that could crush him. The path of the servant and the path of Jesus both call for flint faced courage, commitment and resolve.

By contrast we have the crowds gathering at the roadside, shouting "Hosanna!" I read one commentator on this story this week who looked at exactly what "Hosanna" might have meant at the time. In Greek it is translated, "God save us!" It comes from Psalm 118 where the people cry for liberation. Some suggest that by Jesus' time in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century, Hosanna had become an expression used commonly almost as a greeting- kind of like the Irish way of saying "God help us!" Used in a kind of willy-nilly way it loses its real meaning, becomes common: the Canucks almost lose another last night near the end of the season and we say "God help us" as if God actually cared. The character of the crowd in this story seems to be taking the situation lightly, and this is born out later in the week when they cry "crucify him." Their fickleness and flightiness is contrast with Jesus' flint faced resolve.

Last week we read John 12 in which Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls..." dies... it remains a single grain. But if it faces its death, allows it, a whole new field of wheat is sown. And then he said, "What am I to say? God save me from the time of trial? No God be glorified." And there, right there, is the flint faced resolve. What am I to say? Hosanna? God help us? No. God be glorified in the midst of this great struggle, great adversity, great opportunity for your amazing, transforming power to be shown, again. It is about the way we face adversity.

You know, I always trip over a phrase in the Lord's prayer: "...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." It is also translated, save us from the time of trial. And there is a voice in me that says, "Will, trials come. Trials are a part of life, a necessary part. Don't ask to be saved from them. Let me be glorified in them. Let me show how it is exactly in the trials, in the struggles, in the adversity, that my true saving grace is shown." I now find myself praying, "Save us IN the time of trial" not FROM it.

I want to suggest that sometime this week, if you get access to a computer, that you go online and watch a 20 minute short film called "The Butterfly Circus." Julia showed it to me this week and I was blown away. It is the story of a man born with no arms and no legs. Honestly. The actor, Nick Vujicic (Voy-i-chich) was born with a rare disorder called "tetra-amelia sydrom" leaving him without limbs. "The butterfly circus" is the story of a young man in the 1930s, who finds himself scraping together a living by being a spectacle in the side-show of a circus where people with disabilities are put on display as freaks. The Butterfly Circus is a different kind of circus, where adversity is not displayed as freakish, but is seen as site where the transforming struggle for life is shown in all its amazing beauty. Every performer has a story of struggle. And the main character is facing his own decision. Will he be defined by his disability or transformed in it? Here is a brief clip in which the butterfly circus comes to a poor depression community in need of a little wonder and the impresario of the butterfly circus puts it to the man with no limbs: \*The Butterfly Circus, 10:40-13:08\*

"The greater the struggle, the greater the triumph." Today we head into Holy Week, and for Jesus, every step of this way involves choices. Some have said, here comes one who was destined to die as he did. There was something inevitable, even pre-destined about the events of this week. But for Jesus, the radical Jewish peasant who believed that the world belonged to God and not to Caesar, I believe it was not like that. I believe that as he looked at Jerusalem, took full account of this vision of the Kingdom of God that he had preached and showed in his living, he knew that Roman power would not look kindly on his way, would indeed be threatened by it, and likely would crush him.

And so to choose to take that message to Jerusalem as he did, was to take a huge risk. I think he knew the risk, and knowing the risk, every step would be a struggle, would require a depth of faith and courage. And the story that we mark this week is the story of the unfolding of that depth of faith and courage in the midst of real struggle- in the face of adversity. In the midst of Good Friday. He set his face like flint. And we need to know that every time we choose to follow in his radical love, in his "love your enemy" way, it could cost us, and we will need courage, resolve, faces like flint.

And so I would ask from the perspective of Palm Sunday, what is your Good Friday, right now? And you don't need to answer verbally, but think about, what is it that stands before you, that lies in your path and calls out from you that kind of grit, depth of courage, and resolve and faith that we see in Jesus as he moves down this road on his way to Jerusalem.

He set his face like flint, and there are times when we must do the same. It may not be that the situation we are in is our own choosing, or it may be, like Jesus, a likely consequence of the faith and life we have chosen. But he set his face like flint, not relying on his power and his grace alone to sustain him, but relying on the resolve of God to bring life out of whatever he faced, relying on the promise of God who had brought his ancestors out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery and into freedom, relying on that blessing that had been heard at his baptism, you are my beloved. In you I am well pleased. Relying on the rest of what Isaiah has to say to the Servant. "The Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been confounded. I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. The one who cares for me is ever near." Amen