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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Luke 9: 51-62; Matthew 26: 36-39
March 10, 2024 Sermon

Turning Our Faces Toward Jerusalem

There are two sacred legacies toward which the architecture of this Meetinghouse gestures: that of Athens and that of Jerusalem. Athens is represented by the classical style of the portico just outside, with its pillars and the pediment on top. It's represented as well by the decorative columns placed behind me. The legacy of Jerusalem is found here, in this open Bible, and it's found in the communion table and the baptismal font. Whenever we enter this space, we're thus oriented toward those two centers of learning and of culture.

With that in mind, I'd like to orient our thoughts this morning around a story from each of those sources. One of them, the story of Jesus facing toward Jerusalem, and then praying in the garden of Gethsemane, that God might "let this cup pass from me," is a story with a particular resonance for us, especially during the season of Lent. The other is similar, though with differences. It is the story of the trial of Socrates, in which he is sentenced to die for the crime of corrupting the youth of Athens. In that story, Socrates quite literally dies by drinking a poisoned cup of wine. Given the knowledge of Greek culture among the writers of the New Testament, it's not inconceivable that Jesus' prayer in the Garden, referring to a cup he does not wish to drink, is an underhanded reference to Socrates. I'll leave it to scholars more knowledgeable than I to determine the likelihood of that possibility. Nevertheless, both stories suggest something that might, from a certain angle, be viewed as madness: a will to testify to the truth - the truth of one's own life, the truth of a way of being in the world - though the cost of such testimony is life itself.

By examining these stories, I wish to think through the dynamics of some contemporary figures who have done much the same. There is Dietrich Bonhoeffer of course, and MLK, but more recently there is Alexei Navalny. On January 17, 2021, Navalny flew back to Moscow to face certain arrest, and possibly death. Three weeks ago, that possibility became a reality. It's an event that has remained at the forefront of my mind ever since, and if the handful of conversations I've had about it since are any indication, the same has been true for many of you. What is it that animates those like Navalny, or Bonhoeffer, or MLK? How is it that in the face of immense consequences, such individuals walk into the lions' den, or into the fiery furnace, or into the deepest circles of hell itself? Is this madness? Is it folly? Or is it the height of faith? What lessons might they have for all of us, we who, in different seasons of our lives, must also turn our faces toward our own versions of Jerusalem?

Perhaps it's helpful here to recount a conversation I shared with a friend a year or so back. Navalny came up, as did Bonhoeffer. I'm afraid I don't understand their decisions, my friend admitted. We get one precious life, and it is not to be squandered, or sacrificed, even for the sake of a noble ideal. It seems the height of foolishness to throw it away, my friend admitted, especially when, as so often happens, there are others - spouses, children, friends - who depend upon such people. It all seems reckless. It seems to deny the very gift of life that God has bestowed upon us.

It's hard to disagree. And yet two of the central stories that we rely upon in our culture - Jesus and Socrates - both willingly give their lives for a greater good, a noble ideal, that others

may have life. Look, I too believe that each of our lives are to be cherished, never squandered, precisely because our lives have been granted to us by God. I too believe that life is to be enjoyed, squeezed as if it were a fruit from which we wish to drink its sweetest nectar. Like Shakespeare's Falstaff, surveying all those who died, honorably, on a field of battle, I too wish to say "Give me life." "Who hath honor?" Falstaff later asks. "He that died on Wednesday." Life itself seems far too precious to give it up for some abstract principle. Still, at the end of that conversation, I began to wonder if there was, and is, something greater than the mere preservation of life. If that's true, what might it be?

To approach such a question, it seems fitting that we turn our faces first toward Jesus. The Gospel of Luke tells us that when the days drew near for him to be taken up (i.e. be raised upon the cross), Jesus set his face toward, not away from, Jerusalem. He might well have remained in Galilee. He might well have gone into hiding. The heat had been turned up, after all, when John the Baptist was beheaded. Just prior to the passage we read in Luke, we find that Herod wished to "meet" Jesus, a meeting that does indeed take place a few chapters later. Most people in their right minds would have declined such a "meeting," would have backed off, would have waited for a regime change. Not Jesus. He turns his face toward what he, and everyone around him, knows will be a catastrophe. The text tells us that he went through Samaritan territory on his way to Jerusalem. And it tells us that they reject him. Why? Because he had his face set toward Jerusalem. Not unlike Falstaff, perhaps, they think he's crazy, and they don't want any part of it. "Give me life," they may as well say. Jesus is so determined in his advance toward the scene of confrontation that he warns people away from following him. In essence, he tells them, you don't know what you're getting into. But Jesus knows. He's marching into what will surely be a death trap, and when the moment arrives, it fills him with fear and trembling. "If it be your will, let this cup pass from me," Jesus prays. "Yet not what I want, but what you want," he concludes.

Many have read that entire story as Jesus simply following orders, dying a terrible death in order to settle a cosmic debt owed by humanity to God. Such a reading makes of Jesus an automaton and of God a monster. Far better, I believe, to read the entire confrontation as an argument about freedom. Do we owe our greatest allegiance to the state, as the Roman authorities suggest, and as many states have suggested since? Do we owe our greatest allegiance to religion, as the Temple authorities suggest, and as many religious systems have suggested since? Or is there something greater than these, a God beyond the god of religion, a God beyond the god of the state? Is there something wild and undomesticated about that God, such that whenever people come into contact with such a reality, it immediately confers upon them a value that no state, and no religion ever could? That's what made Jesus so popular among the poor and the peasants, among the sick and the shunned. Jesus saw in people what the state could not see and what the religious authorities would not see: individuals bearing the imprint of God on their faces. Jesus exposed the emptiness of both the state and official religion to confer such worth. He testified, by his bare, naked presence, to the fact that God had chosen the prestige not of the state, and not of religion, but of poor naked wretches wheresoe'er they might be, which in one way or another, is all of us.

Now cut some 400 years earlier, to 399 B.C.E., when Socrates was put on trial. It's an account that we find in Plato's *Apology*, the remarkable account of Socrates' own defense before a criminal court in Athens. The account ends with an unforgettable line. After speaking eloquently, Socrates says to his accusers, "But now it is time that we were going, I to die, and you to live; but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God." In

speaking as he does, Socrates suggests, as he has throughout the *Apology*, that there are some things that are far worse than death. To live a life without integrity, knowing that one has betrayed one's deepest convictions - that is a fate far worse than death for Socrates. To live a life without critical self-examination, without an incessant search for wisdom and truth, no matter how difficult such examination may be - that is a fate far worse than death for Socrates. To live a life in which one is forced to lie and dissemble, especially to oneself - that is a fate far worse than death for Socrates.

Here is how Socrates puts the matter to his accusers: "the difficulty is not to escape death," he says. "The real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong, which is far more fleet of foot." In other words, we're all going to meet death at one point or another. The question is whether we meet it while still holding onto a sense of dignity and integrity. That's no easy feat, given the temptations, even in ancient Athens, to live lives of lazy conformity, narrow self-interest, and an unwillingness to engage in critical examination of one's culture, or one's own self. Speaking to his accusers, Socrates puts it this way: "When I leave this court I shall go away condemned by you to death, but you, (my accusers), will go away convicted by truth herself, he says." Meletus, the chief accuser of Socrates, does indeed go on to live. And Socrates does indeed go on to die. Rather than be smuggled out of Athens by his friends, Socrates drinks the hemlock, the poisoned cup, confident of his choice. Indeed, history has not been kind to the accusers, but it has vindicated Socrates.

Let me bring this around to the present. I thought of both Jesus and Socrates while watching a film recently about Alexei Navalny. In one agonizing sequence, we see him and his wife on a flight back to Moscow, where authorities are planning his arrest. It is, in a way, their Garden of Gethsemane moment, and yet they seem calm. They gaze out the window of the plane. They speak to reporters. They watch in flight entertainments. Eventually, the plane lands, and Navalny addresses reporters who have gathered at the airport. "No, I am not scared," he tells them. "The truth and the law are both on my side," he says, after which he tells his supporters that they too need not be afraid. With what seems to be absolute calm and assurance, he then walks toward customs, where he is immediately arrested.

How is it possible to retain such calm under that kind of duress? I don't know that either Jesus or Socrates was on Navalny's mind in that moment, but I do believe in a peace that passes all understanding. And I believe that peace becomes available to human beings as a gift from on high whenever we find the means to retain our integrity when it is under assault. I believe it becomes available whenever we discover within ourselves the courage to face into adversity, meeting it head on with our best abilities, rather than hiding from it. I believe that peace becomes available whenever we find it within ourselves to speak the truth in times of confusion and deception. I believe that peace becomes available whenever we somehow set our faces toward Jerusalem, toward that which we do not wish to confront, but must. No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging, our opening hymn put it. I believe in such moments, when a remarkable, miraculous peace is given to us by God.

Thankfully, few of us will have moments as dramatic as Alexei Navalny, or Bonhoeffer, MLK or any of the rest. But we do have moments in which we are asked to set our faces toward Jerusalem. It happens whenever our love, whenever our commitment to one another, is somehow challenged by circumstances we cannot control. I have seen people set their faces toward Jerusalem when they have received a diagnosis they could not have imagined. And yet they have found it within themselves to trust a core truth, that in life and in death they belong to God. I have seen it among many of you, when a spouse or a parent has become ill, and you have

been asked to accompany the one you love, even unto the grave. Though it has tested and strained you, I have witnessed so many of you doing your utmost to remain true to your deepest commitments. I have seen it among parents, especially among those who are new to the realities of caring for a child. What seemed like a nice idea turns out to require every last piece of your soul, and yet time and again, I have seen young parents rise to the moment. And I have seen children too, who wish with everything in their being not to face the torments of middle school, or high school, and who daily rise to stake out their own sense of confidence and self assurance in the world. In dozens of ordinary and extraordinary ways, I have seen people, including many of you, set your faces toward your own Jerusalems, standing in the fire, facing down the lions, discovering a peace that passes all understanding. Such things are given to us, I believe, when we live out of our integrity as human beings.

There is one final thing I wish to say about turning our faces toward Jerusalem. There are many among us, I know, who are troubled by the ominous signs of what may yet happen in November. And there are many of us who are, perhaps, even more troubled at what some of our fellow Americans seem willing to do, or to say, or to settle for, in their bid for power. Even more, there are many among us who are alarmed at the ways truth itself has been casually discarded, even after several painstaking national hearings and trials. After all we have seen, after all we have learned, after all we have collectively experienced, it is confounding that seemingly half of all the United States is willing to fall in line with a former President who launched an insurrection. It is particularly alarming, at least to me, that so many people who remain loyal to the man profess some variant of the Christian faith. Say what we will, but this is not going away, not anytime soon. This is now the Jerusalem toward which we all face.

As we do, I want us to recall the integrity of Socrates, who showed us the power of remaining true to the principles of critique, urging those around him not to settle for complacent platitudes. We'll need the courage of Socrates in order to stand firm in the truth, which is not a principle you can pin down but is rather a constant process of examination.

I want us to recall the witness of Jesus, the author of our faith, who faced down both state and religious power in order to demonstrate God's love for what the Bible calls the least of these. We'll need the non-violence, the love, and the peace which passes all understanding, which Jesus demonstrated throughout his ministry.

And yes, I also want us to recall our brother Falstaff, fiction though he is. I want us to recall his demand, give me life. May he correct us if we are ever tempted to waste ourselves upon principles and ideals not worthy of our adherence.

But we'll need some other examples too: Navalny, Bonhoeffer, and King, of course. But maybe more importantly than any of them, we'll need a host of far less dramatic, but no less important exemplars, who have shown us how to hold fast to what we believe, how to stand firm in our convictions in the face of adversity, and how to go on doing what needs to be done for the sake of loving others. People just like you.

I have confidence about the road before us because of what I know to be true: when we turn our faces toward Jerusalem, whatever that Jerusalem might be, Jesus walks beside us, having walked that way before. And I am confident that when we do arrive at our Jerusalem, whatever it finally is, God does meet us there, with a peace that passes all understanding. Thanks be to God.