



## Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene      The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Genesis 15:1-12,17-18](#)

[Philippians 3:17-4:1](#)

[Luke 13:31-35](#)

*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)*

*In the day of trouble, do not hide from us. Keep us on the road. Bring us safety and strength. Help us rest and move in you. Amen.*

Good day, everyone. Welcome to St. Luke's. Many of you know that St. Luke's has long been a place where recovery groups have met. As the pandemic subsides, groups are renewing meetings again, and some are returning here to meet. We have a long history here with Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

You know the greeting at AA and NA, right? When I stand to introduce myself, I say an important acknowledgment about myself. "Hi, I am Joe Smith, and I'm an alcoholic." At which point, you as the whole groups say, "Hi, Joe."

So, here we go—

Hi, my name is David Gortner, and I'm a coward.

*Hi, David.*

Welcome to Cowards Anonymous.

Cowards Anonymous. Because, we all are addicted to dodging. Well, it is true that some of us can become addicted to stirring it up or throwing gas on a fire, or arriving at a party with a blowtorch. But many of us, probably most of us, are addicted to keeping things calm and pretending there is not a difficulty or challenge to face.

ON Ash Wednesday, I quoted from a book, *Fierce Conversations*, about the importance of having conversation. The book helps show how the conversation *is* the relationship. Now, conversation is not email. It is not texting. Conversation is voice to voice, and truly best when it is face to face. So the quote goes like this: "Our careers, our companies, our personal relationships and our very lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time." One conversation – or one withheld conversation – at a time. (Remember, the absence of conversation also contributes.)

So, this week has been a lot about courageous conversation, at St. Luke's. "Courageous conversations" is the theme we have for our Thursday evening sessions (when there is not a vestry meeting or another gathering) during this Lent and into Easter as we seek to build muscles as a congregation. We practice sharing our own faith and our own stories of life, including our doubts and challenges, and inviting and listening to the stories of others, honoring and naming the Holy in others' stories. We also practice speaking truth while also inviting a sharing around difficult topics in a generous way that opens space for people to speak what is at the heart of the matter for them.

So, courageous conversations. We hear courageous conversations in today's scriptures. We hear courage in how Abram spoke with God very directly, and in how Jesus responded to the Pharisees and spoke to the people and to the city that he loved.

Abram doesn't beat around the bush, and he doesn't just sit quietly when God appears to him in a vision and promises him a great reward that begins to sound like promising the whole world. Abram says, "How is this going to happen? I don't have any offspring yet. I have a slave who has been master of the house who will end up inheriting all of this. So, how, really, is this going to happen?" This doesn't sound exactly like an enthusiastic response of "Yay! God has promised me, so I'm going to get behind this promise." But Abram's response is actually very faithful, because it is bringing all of who Abram is into the relationship with God, including the doubts and the frustrations with that relationship. Abram is being honest and direct. And Abram gets a response from God. And then Abram asks for a little more verification – "How will I know that you are going to honor this promise? What pledge can you give me? Give me a sign."

These are fine things for us to ask in our relationship with God, and God wants this kind of honesty. God is also free to respond as God wishes. But that's what being in relationship is – being open and direct. This was a courageous conversation on Abram's part. And it was only at the end of this conversation that the scriptures say that Abram believe, and God counted it to Abram as righteousness. Abram had faith that made him righteous – but he had to ask!

This week, a number of St. Luke's folks have engaged in the work of courageous conversations. We leaned into courageous conversation with a wide array of folks from beyond St. Luke's, in our last documentary-and-discussion session where we focused on white nationalism and white supremacy movements in this region, and on how things can go horribly awry when intervention is pursued, by whatever agency including federal agencies, with presumption and manipulation of the people that they are pursuing. We saw this and discussed what we saw in the powerful documentaries, "Ruby Ridge" and "The Color of Conscience." On Saturday, a few of us went to stand with others from the region along Government Way in Hayden with "Love Lives Here" signs, signaling that Idaho aims to be and fundamentally wants to be an open place for all people – all people.

After that, many of us went to the Human Rights Education Institute to hear Sean Gillespie speak. Sean was a white supremacist, a member of the Aryan Nation and a part of its staff before it was disbanded and dispersed by the authorities. A runaway, he had suffered some abuse in his adolescence that sparked a cascade of rage inside him. He didn't have anyone to talk to, and then he found comrades at the Aryan Nation compound, who were happy to take him in and use their befriending to seduce him into their racist and antisemitic beliefs. They fed him stories that it was actually the Jews' fault that he had been abused. Those were the kinds of lies that were used to distort and pivot someone's anger and rage, and channel them toward a particular people. It was Jews and Blacks, and gays, and any number of other people.

So, Sean was immersed in that world, and started getting white supremacist tattoos all over his arms and face. Then he went off on his own and started doing some terrible things around the country. He spent over 15 years in prison, eight-and-a-half of those years in solitary confinement in a maximum security prison in Colorado, for his crimes that included firebombing a Jewish temple and sending a threatening racist letter to the same temple. During his imprisonment, especially his time in solitary, he began to see himself and the world differently. He began to look at his life and wonder why he had gone down this dark road of hate and rage. He began to think about what he had done to other people, and what this hatred had twisted him into. And he began to read and watch movies that helped him open his mind and heart, including Nelson Mandela'

book written while he was in prison. Through books and movies that were his conversation partners, he began to enter relationships with people he would before have automatically hated. Sean fully renounces the racism and white supremacy to which he had sold himself, publicly condemns these types of groups and their violence, and has devoted himself to building bridges across racial, economic, and social divisions. And he continues to learn. He has even attempted to reach out in courageous care to people he knows that are still trapped in the ways of thinking of white supremacists – but they have refused his contact, calling him a traitor.

That's courage. And it's direct. And it is day by day for Sean.

Jesus is direct in this entire encounter that we read in Luke's Gospel. and in the words he speaks as he takes the long journey toward Jerusalem and toward the cross.

The Pharisees seem to have his interest at heart, don't they? "Oh, we're concerned. King Herod is out to get you. You really should get away from here."

But don't be fooled. There is a real game that the Pharisees are playing. The Pharisees aren't warning Jesus about Herod because they care about Jesus and want to protect him. This Herod (son of the Herod who did try to hunt the baby Jesus down, as we find in Matthew's Gospel), did not have an interest in killing Jesus. This Herod, Luke has told us, was intrigued about Jesus and wanted to see him and to watch him perform a miracle or sign. This is the Herod who kept John the Baptist imprisoned but liked to listen to him from time to time, until Herodias hatched a plot using her daughter Salome to lure Herod into making a promise so that she could demand John be beheaded. This Herod was more curious and wanting to be entertained, perhaps by Jesus throwing himself off the temple so that angels would catch him.

No, the Pharisees were in this passage like they are throughout the Gospel of Luke. They are opposed to Jesus. They eat dinner with him sometimes, but only in order to ensnare him in some error. They look for ways to embarrass him, turn people against him, and publicly puzzle him into a corner. They want to do away with their opponent by cutting him off at the knees. Think about it – they state this false concern for Jesus' safety and say "Herod is out to get you, you should get away from here" only after Jesus has said some harsh things, as a way to get him "off the stage" and out of the public eye. So, they are baiting Jesus, and hoping he will take the bait. If he flees, well, then, he is not the prophet he seemed to be – he doesn't have the chutzpah. If he stands up and fights, that will bring its own consequences.

Jesus responds directly – very directly – to them and to their game. He even uses the terms of their game as the way to respond. And by doing this, Jesus holds up a mirror to them and shows their lie for what it was. "Oh, you've been talking to Herod, have you? Well, okay, you go tell that fox, that sly one, that I am committed to continuing mission I have set out to do. Today, tomorrow, and the next day – and on the third day it will come to conclusion.

Jesus is direct with the Pharisees. And then, he is also direct with the people. He looks out toward Jerusalem, perhaps far on the horizon, and says, "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I would have loved to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you would not." You've likely seen pictures of how a hen will puff out her wings over the heads of her chicks who gather close next to her for shelter from the rain or some looming danger. Jesus is saying, "I want to be like the mother gathering you in and holding you." It's this sweet yearning that Jesus is expressing – this deep desire and also this sorrow. He is speaking this aloud. And by speaking it aloud, he is opening a door for a response. He says, "I want this for you, but you would not have

it.” He doesn’t close the door – he names where the relationship is right now, and by doing this opens the possibility for the people he loves to respond differently.

How might Jesus have otherwise responded? Well, he could have said something sarcastic back to the Pharisees. He could have shamed them. He could have just run away. Or he could have gotten hotheaded about Herod. But he was direct to the challenge of the moment. He didn’t let it slide by.

Sean Gillespie is able to follow this kind of path of courage and clarity, to live and respond as he does now, because courage and clarity have emerged from honesty with himself and openness to be changed. Now, he still bears the marks of his past on him. He has had tattoos removed from his face. But the marks of his white supremacist past are still up and down his arms, as he does not yet have the money to pay for their removal. People see them and become fearful or repulsed – but others who now know him will say, “Oh, look past all that, it is part of his past and he is now reformed and a really good person.” So his own marks of his past become tools and gateways for opening deep conversation. Again, the only way he is able to enter these kinds of courageous conversations is because of the honesty and directness he had with himself – especially from his time in solitary confinement.

In the day of trouble, Lord, may you bring us safety and strength. We know we are not guaranteed freedom from any possible danger – and there may be risks we face when we choose the path of honesty and directness. But when we do take this path, God will bring us to reside in the safety of the core of our being, and give us strength to live with the power that flows out from that core.

And so, fellow “Cowards Anonymous,” we ask for God’s strength to speak with clarity the Truth, and to invite the Truth. Because it’s only by doing this that things begin to get cleared away, for the ground to open, for seeds to blossom, love to bloom, and light to shine and bring growth in unexpected places.

Welcome to the way of Christ – the way of love, light, and truth, that rises gradually, then suddenly, one conversation and encounter at a time. Let’s follow boldly, knowing that God is with us.