

Choice
“Get involved.”
Genesis 17:1-7; Mark 8:27-38
Second in the Lenten series, “Open Hearts”

Rev. John H. Hice
March 8, 2009
First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

In the Audience

Laura and I used to have season tickets to the Grand Rapids symphony. I'd look forward to going. The concert would always come at the end of a long week of work. We'd catch a bite to eat and make our way into the concert hall, maybe in time to hear one of the members of the symphony describe the composers and compositions of the night. Then we'd make our way: up the elevator, up the ramp, up the stairs and into the auditorium, high in the balcony in the very back row. “The nose bleed section” is what I think some would call it.

Have you ever attended a concert? There can be something captivating about it. You take your seat and read through the program, noting the works that will be performed and, perhaps, some descriptions of the composers, the stories behind their work, and bios of some of the performers especially if they are to be soloists. The names of orchestra members are listed, as well as the sponsors and contributors. The crowd assembles, filling the seats in subdued conversations while members of the orchestra walk on stage, taking out their instruments and playing at random – a jumble of notes, scrambled together and making no sense...unless you're maybe into free-style jazz.

Then, out comes the concert master with the applause of the assembly. The orchestra tunes, and then falls silent. You might take out a pair of binoculars to better see the faces of those on stage. Some in the audience take this last chance to cough and clear their throats; then, dead silence until the conductor walks on stage with a round of applause, ascends the stand and raises the baton as silence once again embraces the crowd. Then with hands in motion the musicians begin with feeling and passion and rehearsed, season skill. The hall fills with a partnership of expression that transforms ink dots and lines on paper it into music that wants to entertain you and reach, convincingly, into your heart.

The music would play, and I'd pay attention as I took it all in, with the light on the performers and we, the audience, in the darkness, taking it in as I would relax...relax

sometimes too much after a long, hard week of work...and, relaxing too much, I might close my eyes reasoning that listening is better without the distraction of sight. And sometimes the music would take me into a dream.

Carrying the Cross

Concerts are not for naps. I know that. And sometimes an elbow gently tapping my side would remind me of that. Yet, I think it's possible, sometimes, to be so caught up with merely watching and listening and being entertained and sometimes falling asleep, that you can get the idea that being a part of the passive audience is all you're meant to do with certain aspects of life. It's like the world goes on before you and all you can do is observe it.

On stage is the President, or senators and representatives; and while you can talk about their decisions and offer your opinions the same way you might discuss whether *Slum Dog Millionaire* really deserved as many Oscars as it received, you can still be left merely in the audience. Only now you are not just an observer; you also become a beneficiary or a victim of their actions.

On stage are the leaders of our nation's economy, and we watch as they make their decisions, and those who act out of calloused greed end up affecting our jobs and homes. Still in the audience, we are yet very affected.

I wonder how much God intended any of us to just sit in the audience.

As the story in the Old Testament goes, Abram was 99 years old, an age that makes me think of my great uncle, whom I thought was that old, sitting in front of his television, the sound turned way up, watching the Tigers play day-after-day. But the story says that the Lord appeared to Abram, in effect putting him right on stage. God made a covenant with him and gave him a new name. Abram became Abraham; and since names all had their meaning back then, the "exalted ancestor" became "ancestor of a multitude." Then Abraham went on to be a player in God's world, with his wife Sarah, he would become the father of a people who would be set aside to bring God's blessing to the nations.

Getting up from your seat in the audience to be a player: isn't that what it means to live by faith?

Jesus' disciples, for the most part, had been watching him at work changing the world and inviting the people to enter a Kingdom of God that would challenge all the

other kingdoms of the world. There had been talk about him. Some like King Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist, come back to life.¹ Others thought Jesus was a prophet – maybe even Elijah – returned from the dead. There was a lot of chatter about who Jesus could be.

So, walking along the road leading north toward Herod's capital, Jesus starts a conversation. Then he asks his friends and observers, "Who do people say that I am?" They repeat all they've heard from the rumor mill. Maybe their voices begin to rise and they start speaking out-of-turn and laugh like a group gathered 'round the water cooler.

Until Jesus stops them short with another question, which is, of course, *the* question; the question that is finally posed to anyone who hears of Jesus and is confronted with the call to faith: "But who do you say that I am?"

No matter what everybody else says, this is the question that matters. Who do you say Jesus is? Every time he heals a person and you catch a glimpse of the Kingdom: there is the question. Every time he tells a parable and asks, "What does it mean?" then says, "Go thou and do likewise," there is the question. Every time Jesus finds his way through the normal hum of life and makes himself known to you: there is this question: "Who do you say Jesus is?" "What will you do with him?" "What will you allow him to do with you?" It's all tied to the question. So I expect that, when he asks it on the road heading north, the chatter stops so you could hear a raven far in the distance. Silence, as it were; with stunned disciples standing, wide-eyed, looking at him like faith has just been made a personal thing. "Who do you say that I am?"

Then Peter says it: "You are the Messiah."

Do you know what this means? If Peter is right, there are going to be consequences. Until now, the appearance of the Messiah would mean the end of Israel's humiliation. Until now it would mean they would rise up and drive out everyone and everything foreign and take control of their lives, God's people would show the world how they were blessed by power. They would teach the rest of the world a thing or two.

So, when Peter thinks he see's the mantel of the Messiah on Jesus, this is what he thinks he sees and that is what he thinks they are in for. Power. But this is what they get: a Messiah who teaches you to love your enemies; he tells you to forgive those who hurt you; make peace; identify with the poor; be ever-compassionate. It's anything but

power talk. Then, he tells them that when they go to Jerusalem he'll be humiliated and arrested and die the death of someone who is cursed, before he rises again.

Can you see why Peter does the unthinkable, taking Jesus aside to rebuke him? Jesus is not going to follow the script they have for him. He's got his own script, *God's* script; and that's what he has to follow.

Jesus will suffer and die because a world bent on a winner-take-all way of life will not settle for being turned upside-down. If Jesus is going to change the way things are: it means he will die for it. That's what redeeming the world will cost him. That's the price paid for your freedom. That's what the real Messiah is bound to do for you.

Then Jesus says, "If you are going to be my disciple you won't just stay in the audience and watch. You'll take part in this change; you'll pick up your cross and follow me."

This is no little thing. This is your ultimate choice. You choose not to be a spectator, only; and you choose not to be the world's victim. You choose rather to belong to Jesus and join his quest to bless the world into being what God has always had in mind.

Jim Harnish says in a Lenten study he wrote a couple of years ago that if you want to belong to Jesus you need to go beyond a life that is centered on itself.² No longer just looking on as one in the audience, you get out of your seat. Getting out of your seat to take your place on stage is what the season of Lent is about.

This is our time to believe Jesus and have faith that God will take care of us, then, together and with Jesus, take to the stage and make a difference in our world, especially caring for one another and those whom the world has been leaving behind. It's a time to get up from our seats where we're prone to worry about what will happen to our church and join together to take charge of our church and its ministry. It's a time to consider what quest Jesus wants each of us to follow; then with determination carry our crosses to do it. It's the season to let go of simply watching as people in the audience in order to pick up our instruments and play.

In the Symphony

When I was younger and played my trombone in the symphony, I am proud to say I never slept.

May we, now, get up from our seats and play.

References

- [1] Pheme Perkins, "The Gospel of Mark", *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol VIII* . Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 622.
- [2] James Harnish, *Radical Renovation: Living the Cross-Shaped Life*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2008. p17.