

Sermon Text for February 25, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Judges 16:4-5, Mark 14:10-11

“Opportunity knocks”

So how are you doing with your device free lent? It has been exceptionally good for me. Do you know that I didn't hear about the death of Billy Graham until Elsie Hundley told me. See, device free lent, it works. Elsie is now my new source of information. The death of Billy Graham is the passing of someone as close to a Protestant saint as we can get. He was baptized in Peniel Baptist Church in Florida, the same place where Rachel went to preschool as a child, so our ties to Billy Graham go back a bit. I took our church to see him at the Jacksonville stadium in Florida and guess who his opening was? Charlie Daniels, and yes he did play the Devil Went Down to Georgia. It was amazing. Billy Graham was captivating.

In our five years in Moscow most of the Russian Christians who were not Orthodox that we met said that they came to know Jesus Christ through his 1992 visit to Russia. He had been there before, but it was as a result of that visit that the Baptist Union in Russia really saw its growth. In the United States we see him as a great evangelical champion. All across the world he is seen as someone who has brought the saving message of Jesus Christ to them personally and to their hearts. I personally met dozens of people in Russia who attributed their current Christian life, which was a diametrically opposite life from communist Soviet Union, to the presence of Billy Graham. So yeah, I liked him a lot if you were wondering. He led crusades to over 400 locations. He was an amazing man who saw clearly the opportunities that the Lord had laid before him.

Our lives are filled with opportunities. Many people much more famous than me have talked about the intersection of desire and opportunity which leads to sin. Others have spoken about where preparation and opportunity meet then you find success. Opportunity is one of those things that can be used for the kingdom of God, and can be used to do the will of evil, we have seen that historically in so many different situations.

Today in our Scripture we will see those who had opportunities and chose to turn away from God. You see in Lent, and we are in the second Sunday of Lent, we are called to come face to face with our sin. It is the time of year that we recognize that Jesus was betrayed and that we have played and continue to play a role in that betrayal. During lent you should not be able to make it through the season without some sense of complicity in the greatest tragedy that ever

took place, which is the crucifixion of our Savior Jesus. Because we believe that if we face it and if we recognize our complicity then when the opportunity arises again, and it will, to follow the will of God or to follow our fleshly desires, we will choose that path less traveled, the narrow one that leads to His kingdom. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURE

My oldest daughter Rachel texted me excitedly this past week and said that she had seen the best movie that she has ever seen in her life. The Black Panther, I have not seen it, but what I hear from people that I respect, I highly recommend it for a whole variety of reasons. But all of those Marvel movies, which I have seen every one except for the Black Panther now, is the classic story of good against evil and you always have villains intertwined. The tricky part about those movies is that you aren't always sure who the villain is and who the good guys or girl is. The movie has to mature and progress in order for you to figure it out. That sounds a lot like our life when as we go through it we aren't always sure who is going to take the opportunities to do good, or to go along with what our desires might be which lead us to turn our back on God.

We know a lot of fictional villains. The Joker, the Penguin, Cruella de Ville, Captain Hook, Darth Vader, Ursula, Freddy Kruger, Dracula, Hannibal Lecter. You can make your own list. We have our real life historical villains as well. Nero, Ghenghis Khan, Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin. We have our Scriptural Villains as well, Adam and Eve aren't normally seen in that light, but they were responsible, after all, for allowing sin to enter the world. I think it is safe to put them in the category of villain. According to US law a means, motive, and an opportunity must be established before guilt can be assessed in a criminal proceeding. Adam and Eve had all three. The means to take the fruit, the motive to take the fruit, so that they could become like god, and the opportunity to take it. The opportunity is what we are going to focus on today.

Delilah is a well known villain, especially in the verse that we read today that sometimes we forget. She was tempted to betray her husband for money. There was also some patriotic element to that as she was a Philistine herself. Speaking about patriotism, how about those American curlers. I'm ashamed to say that this year I actually watched some of it. I swore that I never would, but I did.

But is there a greater villain in all of Scripture than Judas? Yes, you might say the devil, but as far as a person is concerned, is there anyone who has been portrayed and given the title more as the villain as Judas? What each of these people have in common was an opportunity that revealed itself, a motive to pursue it, and a means to do so.

I am still in shock with what happened in Florida. I can't be more proud of those high school students taking this tragedy and turning it into something positive where they are able to take this platform that for a brief moment they have now, and turn it into something that is good. They have seized the opportunity to do good, to counterbalance the opportunity that the shooter had to do unspeakable evil. But what we have to come face to face with today, this Lenten season, is to realize that these villains, all of them, are us. We are just like them. When we are presented with opportunities to betray our Lord, to turn our back on God, we do just that.

You see in each of us there dwells a strong desire which we are prompted to gratify at times, without thinking whether their gratifications might be right or wrong, or what impact pursuing these opportunities might have on us and our families. And when desire and opportunity meet, there is the danger that desire would win. And once it wins, once it learns how to win, again and again it will win so that when that opportunity knocks again, we respond, to our peril.

In our first Scripture Delilah had the opportunity. It is interesting that she was approached by the Philistine lords. She wasn't necessarily looking for an opportunity, but it came to her. The opportunity becomes even more appealing as she learns that she can make a fortune from this opportunity, as each Lord promises a large sum to her. She takes the bait and the first thing we hear after this Scripture is her questioning her husband as to what it is that makes him strong.

Judas, on the other hand, was looking for an opportunity. That's what our Scripture tells us. Judas was looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus. We see this term betray bookend our Scripture this morning. It is easy to make him a villain because we see that his motive was money, especially if we pair this Scripture with John 12:6 where we see clearly his motives. We also see John and Luke interject Satan as the one who possesses him to encourage him to take advantage of that opportunity.

But Mark paints a different picture. He reminds us to begin these verses that Judas was one of the twelve. He wasn't an outside that spent his entire time in Jesus' presence to betray him. No, Judas loved Jesus. Jesus loved Judas as one of his own. We should have been warned in Mark 3:14 and known all along what was going to happen, but through this time we see Judas as just one of the close, intimate disciples of Jesus.

But then opportunity knocks. Do you see the juxtaposition of Judas and the woman from last week. She also had an opportunity to prepare Jesus for his death by pouring ointment over

his head to make him ready for his burial. She was criticized for taking this opportunity to focus on Jesus. Judas, on the other hand, was probably so furious by what she had done that it motivated him to look for an opportunity to betray Jesus. Also, this betrayal was made sweeter by the money that was involved.

Before we chalk Judas off as someone who was evil to the core and so very different from us. Before we chalk off the shooter as someone who had mental health and so was so very different from us. Before we do any of that, we need to look at the opportunities that we find in our lives, and when opportunity knocks, how do we respond and answer?

We, like Judas, profess friendship and discipleship in our Savior, Jesus. We love him. But in fact, we betray him when opportunity knocks. Judas did so, finally, in a response to an offer for money. He didn't lift a violent hand against Jesus, but his inner disloyalty led to a kiss which was deadlier than a sword or a club. The indifference of Christians like us to the poor, to the marginalized, to those who don't have the same opportunities than we do because of where they were born or who their parents were, this indifference in the face of a myriad of opportunities to reach out to them, is our tragic betrayal in this day and age. I can't encourage you enough this Lenten season to not allow the opportunities to pass you by where you can make a difference.

Amen.