

“Stand Up for What is True!”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after The Epiphany (B)

17 January 2021

“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” — John 1:50

It was just past midnight, on January 27, 1956, when the phone call came. Inside a simple white-frame house, on South Jackson Street in Montgomery Alabama, the then new 28-year-old pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church raised the receiver to his ear. As his wife and 10-year-old daughter slept in a bedroom nearby, the voice on the other line said: “Nigger, we’re tired of your mess. If you aren’t out of town in three days, we’re going to blow your house up and blow your brains out!”

Deeply shaken, the young pastor went back to the kitchen, made himself a cup of coffee, slumped down at the kitchen table, and buried his face in his hands. The silence around him was deafening. After several minutes, as tears slowly gathered in his eyes, he began to pray aloud. “Lord,” he said, “I’m down here trying to do what is right. But now I’m afraid. People are looking to me for leadership. If I stand before them without strength, without courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can’t face this alone.” His voice faded to a whisper. And still the silence persisted.

Years later, he would explain what happened next, and who he believed he heard speaking to him through the fearful silence. “Martin,” a voice said, “Martin Luther, stand up! Stand up for the Gospel. Stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. Stand up for righteousness.” The voice, he was certain, was the voice of God, a voice both commanding and reassuring, containing in it both a challenge and a balm.

His fears suddenly vanished—but not the threats. Several days later, a bomb did explode on the front steps of his house, although no one inside was hurt. Yet on the following Sunday, he did stand up, in the pulpit of his church, and declared: “Tell Montgomery they can keep on shooting and I’m going to stand up to them. Tell Montgomery they can keep bombing and I’m going to stand up to them.” Armed with a new courage and a stronger resolve, Martin Luther King, Jr. resumed his role in the Montgomery bus boycott initiated by Rosa Parks—an action that desegregated the transit system in that city and is often cited as the beginning of the modern Civil Rights movement.

Sixty-five years later, at a little past one in the afternoon, along a marble stairway in our nation’s Capital building, another man, another Black man, stood up for justice, stood up for righteousness, although he might have felt he was only hearing the voice of duty. Eugene Goodman had joined the Capitol Police Department in 2009. Before that he had served in the U.S. Army, having seen combat in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division.

For eighty-five tense seconds on January 6, 2021, Officer Goodman, armed only with a night stick, held back dozens of rioters who had broken into the Capitol in an effort to disrupt the counting of votes of the Electoral College. The insurgents had already breached additional entrances with deadly force. One officer had been killed and several others were seriously injured.

Twice Officer Goodman retreated up a flight of stairs. His apparent retreat was, in fact, a ruse. He wasn’t fleeing at all but was luring the mob away from the Senate chamber where

lawmakers, including the Vice-President, were sheltering and where officers had not yet secured the doors. His quick thinking, his courage prevented what undoubtedly would have been a violent, possibly lethal, confrontation. The mob came at him with hatred in their eyes and murder in their hearts, and he stood up to them. Shouting taunts and insults, they came at him, and he stood up to them. By the same strength and grace that had emboldened a frightened pastor many decades before, he stood up to them. He stood up on the side of duty and devotion. He stood up on the side of democracy. And, yes, in so doing he stood up for truth, he stood up for righteousness.

Dear friends, it is my belief that the line of history that runs between that night in Montgomery in 1956 and that afternoon in Washington eleven days ago is a direct and a revealing thread. Two citizens, two inheritors of their nation's birthright—though generations and callings apart—each rose to defend that nation in its hour of peril. Each stood up for an ideal, a hope, something larger than themselves, though whose attainment is always just beyond our reach. Not insignificantly, as Black Americans, each of them answered the call of a nation that historically had sought to deny them and their race the fruits of that ideal and the fulfillment of that hope; a nation in which that same birthright continues to be denied, and for the same reasons, and where the struggle for truth and justice and righteousness—nothing less than these—is still going on.

In the incomparable legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the quick-second courage of Officer Eugene Goodman—and through countless other defenders of freedom before and since—we have our champions, we have our models of redemptive action; we have those for whom the ideal, the hope, the dream of freedom is far greater than the sum of our many transgressions. It remains for us, by God's grace, to take up their challenge, to honor their courage and their trust, and so to speak and do and unite in those things that will sweep back the tide of hatred and ignorance and violence now infecting our country; that will stand up to the mob and mind bent on destroying all that we hold as true.

In this morning's Gospel from St. John, Jesus reminds Nathaniel that there are more and far larger signs of divine presence than mere clairvoyance. "You will see greater things than these," he promises him. Indeed, he will see "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." He will see the glory of God fully manifest in Jesus the Christ.

Unlike the apostle, we should not need to be so reminded. For the wonder and the power of our faith is that we have already seen the glory; we already know the truth, as God has given us the light to seek it. Our task today and every day is to live that truth with devotion and confidence, to cherish and protect it, and now more than ever when it is under assault; for the sake of the land we love, in the name of the Kingdom of love that we live to proclaim. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +