

“If These Were Silent”
Luke 19:28-40
Palm Sunday

April 14, 2019
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Does the name Terry Fox ring a bell for anyone here?

If we were living in Canada, it would be a familiar name.
There are statues of Terry Fox in various locations in Canada.
When I tell you, some of you may remember.

Terry Fox was a young man from Canada who, in the late 1970s, lost a leg to cancer. Fox was so overcome by what he saw in the hospital when he was getting treatment—others who were fighting cancer, kids who were losing their lives to the disease—Fox wanted to do something to promote cancer research.

So in 1980, Fox decided he would run across Canada on one good leg and one prosthetic leg, and ask the citizens of Canada to each donate \$1 for Cancer research in honor of his run.

It’s a remarkable story.
At every turn there was an obstacle that Fox faced.

- First he had to get used to running a marathon every day on his prosthesis.
- Then he had to get the publicity out...no internet, no social media in those days, how would anyone know he was doing this? He spent the first weeks with almost NO ONE aware of his endeavor.
- He ran in the rain, he ran against the wind.
- He ran on highways, cars almost knocking him off the road.

Yet no matter what came at him, Fox kept going.
Day after day.
Marathon after marathon.

Eventually word spread about what he was doing. After a while, local news stations picked up the story. Fox would enter a city, and thousands would stand at the side of the road cheering him on.

He made speeches.
He held fundraisers along the route.
Expectation and hope started to soar.

Will Terry Fox make it across Canada?
This guy could really run across Canada!

Terry Fox ran for 3,339 miles, the equivalent of over 128 marathons. But early in September, he started coughing, went to the hospital, and learned that the cancer had returned in his lungs.

Fox stopped his run. He went home, got treatment.
This time, the treatment did not work.
Nine months later, he was dead.¹

I thought of Terry Fox today, because this was a person who did something he did not have to do. Some said that he was endangering his health, running all those miles. He was depleting his energy, making it more likely for the cancer to return.

He didn't have to do it, but he did it.
He gave his life trying to save the lives of others.
It's not too far from the story that we tell today, this week....

Today we tell the story of someone else who entered a city to a crowd of people, cheering him on.

Luke writes:

¹ This story is told in a documentary entitled "Into the Wind," in the ESPN series "30 for 30". There is also a trove of information on the Wikipedia website for Terry Fox.

“As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully...saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’”

A day of excitement, right?
Possibility and promise in the air.
Jesus, entering Jerusalem, praised as a king...

And five days later, Jesus was dead.

Why did he do it?
He didn't have to do it...he didn't have to go to Jerusalem, where he knew he would find trouble.

But he did it.
He did it because he had to do it.

Or did he have to do it?
This is the question I struggle with every time we come to Holy Week.
Did Jesus HAVE to go to Jerusalem? Why not stay in Galilee?

If Jesus stays in Galilee, he can keep healing people, and he can keep teaching people, and maybe, just maybe, Jesus could live many more years and his ministry could last and last and last...

He didn't have to do it.
Or did he have to do it?

Part of the reason I'm torn about this is Jesus himself, what he says, what he does.

Back in chapter 13, Jesus says:

“...today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

It seems clear—in Jesus' mind, he has to do it.

But then there's the scene in the Garden.

Do you remember that scene?

Jesus praying: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, note my will but yours be done.”

It’s as if Jesus himself is saying, “I’m not sure I have to do this...”

Now, if you were asking the Gospel writer Luke, Luke would say, “He had to do it.”

Look again at the drama of Palm Sunday.

Luke presents it as the fulfillment of prophesy.

For example, at the beginning of our text for today, Jesus commands his disciples to do what?

To find a colt that has never been ridden, and bring it to Jesus.

Well, that’s a strange thing to ask for.

Why not just walk into Jerusalem?

Why ride a colt?

You have the answer in our call to worship this morning.

Riding into Jerusalem on a colt was understood as a fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah.

“Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Or again at the end of our text, when the Pharisees say, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” Jesus answers, “...if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

That’s not just Jesus exaggerating to make a point.

Jesus is quoting scripture.

Another prophet, Habakkuk:

“The very stones will cry out...”

In other words, according to Luke, what happened on Palm Sunday was the fulfillment of what God promised long ago.

It's as if Luke wants us to know:
It was supposed to happen like this.
Jesus didn't have a choice. He HAD to do it.

Let's pause a moment.
I think there's an important distinction to be made.
On the one hand, it can sound like this:

I had to do it.
You know what I mean?

I had to do it, didn't want to do it....

I recall reading the obituaries of former President George H.W. Bush, when he died last November. At least one of them mentioned his infamous distaste for broccoli. Do you remember this?

It was March of 1990.
It made the news!

"I do not like broccoli," the President said, responding to queries about a broccoli ban he has imposed aboard Air Force One..."And I haven't liked it since I was a little kid and my mother made me eat it. And I'm President of the United States, and I'm not going to eat any more broccoli!"

The article did go on to note that "...although Mr. Bush is President, there may be a higher power on the subject of wholesome food. Barbara Bush...has been threatening to serve [the President] a meal of broccoli soup and salad, a broccoli main course, and then, in Mrs. Bush's words, "finish it with a little broccoli ice cream."²

Now, if she had done that, what do you think former President Bush would have done?

² "I'm President, So No More Broccoli!", by Maureen Dowd, *The New York Times*, March 23, 1990.

I think he would've done what his wife told him to do.
I think he would've eaten the broccoli, and said, "Ugh...I had to do it."

But there's another way to think of those five words.
Not "I had to do it."
But...I had to do it.³

A few years ago, a story appeared in *Texas Monthly* magazine.

The story was about John McClamrock, a 17-year-old boy who, on October 17, 1973, bounded out of bed, threw on his bell-bottom jeans and headed to Hillcrest High School in Dallas, Texas.

He was, according to a girl he dated, "the All-American boy, just heartbreakingly beautiful" with blue eyes and black wavy hair. He was a football player. That afternoon, covering a kickoff return for the Hillcrest Panthers, he dove to make a tackle. His head collided with the other boy's thigh, and suddenly John wasn't moving.

The ambulance carried him to Presbyterian Hospital. Doctors asked his mother, Ann, what religion she was. They suggested she call her pastor, because it did not look like John would make it through the night. If he did make it, they said, he would be permanently paralyzed from the neck down.

Fifty-four-year-old Ann McClamrock looked at the doctors, her hands trembling, and said, "My Johnny is not going to die. You wait and see. He is going to have a good life."

Well, John made it through the night, and then another, and then more. After six months in the hospital, they called the family in for a conference. John's neck injury was so bad that he could not sit up in a wheelchair.

One of the staffers then said, "We have found that ninety-five percent of families cannot handle this kind of care. Here is a list of nursing homes that would be good for your son."

³ I am indebted to a sermon by Dr. Fred Craddock for this distinction in how we say, "I had to do it."

At this, his mother stood up and said, “We will be taking Johnny home, thank you.”

There they fixed up his room with a hospital bed.

Every day, his mother fed him, bathed him, changed him, and turned him to prevent bedsores from developing. His mother never left him, except on Sunday mornings when she would go to church, and John’s brother, Henry, would watch over him.

At night, they would watch television together, and then before going to bed, they always read together a Prayer of Thanksgiving printed on a little laminated card, which ended with these words:

“Lord Jesus, may I always trust in your generous mercy and love. I want to praise you, now and forever. Amen.”

In 1986, much to many people’s surprise, John made it to his thirtieth birthday. About once a year he’d have a life-threatening medical crisis, but he always made it through somehow. Whenever he came home from the hospital, his mother would say, “Johnny, I’m so proud of you.”

When Ann reached her 70s, she bought an exercise cycle. She realized that to continue to care for her son, she would need to stay in good shape. So every evening, after turning John one last time, she peddled away.

The years rolled by.
Ann caring, and peddling, and turning.
John going in and out of the hospital.
The nightly prayers flowing.

In 2007, at the age of eighty-eight, Ann fell at home and broke her shoulder. She had to be hospitalized, but she left two days early (against doctor’s orders) to get home to care for John. It was then, according to Henry, that she added another line to the prayer of thanksgiving:

“Please God, let me live one day longer than John, so that I may care for him.”

In January 2008, Ann and John and Henry celebrated Ann's 89th birthday. Days later John was taken to the hospital, only this time the end was near.

Henry brought Ann to the hospital to visit.

Smoothing back his wavy black hair, Ann McClamrock looked at her beloved boy and promised, "Johnny, we'll be back together soon."

"I know we will," John said.

Then he told his mother something he had never said before. "I know how hard it's been for you."

"Hard?" Ann asked. "Johnny, it's been an honor."

The next day, John died quietly.

On the day of his funeral, his mother was not present.

She had been rushed to the hospital.

Within a few weeks, she too was dead.

Ann and John are buried next to each other in a cemetery near Love Field in Dallas.⁴

Now...if you had asked Ann McClamrock, why did you do it?
Did you have to spend every day, taking care of your child?
Do you think she would've said...ugggh, yeah...I had to do it...

Or do you think she would've said: I had to do it.

We know about this.

Your teenager calls you at 1am. She's at a party.

There's drinking at the party, too much going on at the party.

And your daughter does not want to be there anymore.

⁴ I first ran across this story in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, "Fix My Life," preached on April 26, 2010 at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York. The story originally appeared in "Still Life," by Skip Hollandsworth, *Texas Monthly*, May, 2009.

You told her, that any time she was in an uncomfortable situation, to give you a call and you would come get her, no questions, no judgment.

She wants you to pick her up, take her home.

It's 1am.

What will you do?

Stay in bed?

No....you'll pick her up.

You'll do it, because you have to do it.

Sometimes, "have to" isn't just obligation.

Sometimes, many times—"have to" is LOVE.

Jesus did not go to Jerusalem because someone forced him, coerced him, tricked him, deceived him...no.

Jesus went of his own free will.

On the one hand, Jesus chose to do it.

On the other hand....Jesus HAD to do it.

Jesus went to Jerusalem because that's what the love of God asked him to do.

Do you know what HAD TO feels like...when it's done out of love?

It feels like freedom.

The freedom to love in ways that you never expected to love.

The freedom to serve someone you never expected to serve.

Getting back to Terry Fox for a moment...shortly before he began his marathon of hope, Fox wrote to the Canadian Cancer Society about the reasons for his run.

He said:

"I soon realized that [getting better] would be only half my quest. As I went through the 16 months of...chemotherapy, I was rudely awakened by the feelings

that...coursed through the cancer clinic. There were faces with the brave smiles, and the ones who had given up smiling. There were feelings of hopeful denial, and the feelings of despair.

My quest would not be a selfish one. I could not leave [the clinic] knowing these faces and feelings would still exist, even though I would be set free from mine.

Somewhere the hurting must stop....and I was determined to take myself to the limit for this cause.”⁵

I said at the beginning that he didn't have to do it.
But let me take that back.
I think he HAD to do it.

Allow me to share a wish with you.

I do not want bad things to cross your path.
But I also hope you know the experience of following Christ in such a way, that when someone asks you, “Why did you do this?”

Why did you spend countless hours at the church?
Why did you commit two hours every Wednesday to “It’s
Elementary!”?

Why did you spend all that time as a youth group sponsor when those teenagers weren’t even your own kids?

Why did you volunteer for Interfaith Housing Network?
Why did you give over 10% of your income away ever year?
Why did you downsize your house and go to work for Habitat?

Why did you get up every Sunday morning and go to church and then go spend the afternoon in a nursing home with people who may not remember you were there the next day?

⁵ This quote came from the Wikipedia website on Terry Fox. The source is cited as Frank Cosentino, *Not Bad, eh?: Great Moments in Canadian Sports History*, 1990.

I hope your answer won't be "I don't know..."

Or

I had to do it.

I hope you'll say:

"I had to do it."

Amen.