

Spring Training for the Christian Team

Lent 5: Scaling the Walls

(Joshua 6: 1-20; Acts 16: 6-10; Psalm 51; Mark 10: 17-27)

The old Peanuts comic strip had some great observations about what the “whole trouble” with life is, didn’t it? Here’s one of my favourites. Charlie Brown and his ball team have just finished a game. As always, they lost. As usual, they haven’t scored a single run, and have been soundly beaten by double digits. Charlie Brown is standing, dejected, on the pitcher’s mound. Getting a little misty and philosophical, he says to Linus, who is standing near soothing himself with his blanket: “Life is just too much for me. I’ve been confused from the day I was born. I think the whole trouble is that we’re thrown into life too fast, we’re not really prepared...” Linus replies, in his dry fashion, “Well, what did you want—a chance to ‘warm-up’ first?”

Thus far in Lent, on the model of professional baseball and Spring Training, we have been doing some ‘warm-ups’ for Christian living, and we’ve played a few practice games against some of the tough opponents of Christian faith. We have another tough game in front of us today, against a very different kind of opponent. But before we go out onto the field, I want to give a little pre-game pep talk, just the way all the famous coaches do, and here it is. You know that old saying they love to repeat around amateur sports— “It doesn’t matter whether you win or lose, but only how you play the game—well I’m here to tell you that it *does* matter whether we win or lose! In Christian living and in the *real* game we’re at the professional level now. Winning does matter, everything is at stake, and this is far more than a game. So here’s a thought I want you to plant in your minds so firmly that nothing can knock it out—not even a fastball to the helmet, or a bat to the belfry. This is something Jesus said in the gospel lesson we read this morning, it was demonstrated by Joshua at Jericho and further illustrated by Paul in his missionary travels: “With *people*, there are things that are *impossible*, but with God *nothing* is impossible.” With God, and from God’s vantage point, the whole horizon is nothing but possibilities.

When Jesus gave us that little nugget of strategy, I don’t believe for a moment that he offered it as a trite little motto by which you can whistle and dance your way through life, or a convenient vaccine against any difficulties. I don’t think he was suggesting that God will jump in and do the impossible *for* you just as often and as quickly as you might wish. What he said, first of all, was a massively important and vitally realistic thing for humans to know, and that is that there *are* things we cannot do—things our muscles cannot lift no matter how strong we think we are, things even our cleverness can’t outsmart. Our humanness comes with

limitations, and in fact, there's a particularly big one at the end of it. We do—and will—encounter things in this life that are impossible. But the other part of what Jesus said is equally vital information: the things that are impossible for us really are a matter of *perspective* and *appearance*, because they are *not* impossible to God. This, according to Jesus, Joshua and Paul, is a key element of God's nature and a vital step for us in understanding what it is that God offers to us. God offers possibilities, and he offers them especially where we can see nothing but impossibilities.

Well, that's our pep-talk, now let's get on with the game. Our opponents today are *impossibilities*, or at least that's what they're made of. As for a face or character, what they resemble most are "walls". Most of them are cold as stone, thicker than life, higher than you can see over, seemingly endless. And they just stand there, blocking our way, unmoving and unfeeling, bouncing all our frustrations right back at us. These walls have a very unusual style of play. Unlike the Giants and Thorns, where you can at least expect a little combat, the Walls just stand there. They don't do anything, and they don't have to.

When I was a little nipper, learning to play hockey on the backyard rink with my older brothers, on the rare occasions when they didn't make me play goalie, and when I was allowed to actually shoot the puck and try to score, that wasn't always a rewarding experience. You see, I had one brother who might have enjoyed doing things to frustrate me. On some of those occasions when I was allowed to shoot the puck, he would play goal, but he would do that by simply lying down across the front of the net. And because I hadn't learned to raise the puck, there was no way I could score. That wall across the net would beat me every time. Lucky for him, I hadn't learned that a hockey stick can also make a pretty good weapon, or that sometimes you can move a wall simply by poking the right spot. In any event, that was a lasting lesson about walls, and about how to get beaten by your own frustrations.

The walls that we Christians encounter as opponents to faith have a similar style of play. They don't battle us, nor do they need to. But it's amazing how many Christians will immediately try to battle them. In fact, by far the most common response upon encountering a wall is to use your head—not as a thinking device, but as a battering ram. And it's equally amazing how many Christians go around complaining, loudly and bitterly, about the headache after such an encounter. Some Christian folk, on the macho model, will try to push a wall over, and will quickly exhaust their strength in the process. Some will try to tunnel under, but may soon discover that what they're digging is not a tunnel but a grave. These Walls of impossibility are certainly the most stubborn and frustrating enemy that you will find in life, and they chalk

up an alarming success rate even against the Christians who have battled and beaten Giants and Thorns. And what a tragic reality that is, to have won so many battles and still lose the war.

Let's take a closer look at these walls and what it is they represent, and how it is that they can make us beat ourselves into submission. I find that there are basically two kinds of walls in life. The one is just as real as real can be—like those walls around the city of Jericho, or the wall that stopped Paul when he was trying to go northeast to the Black Sea coast. The other kind of wall only seems to be real, but to say that it “only seems” is quite misleading. You see, these are the walls that we build ourselves, and what we build them with are fears, and as *everyone* knows—even those who won't admit it—fears can be much harder and stronger than bricks. Here are a few examples. For the person who cannot get on an airplane, or someone who cannot go out into a crowd, or the person who cannot even think of starting a new career, these people all encounter a wall, and though it is clearly built out of their own fears, that does not make it any less real, or any thinner or lower than the other kind of wall. Fortunately, with regard to this kind of wall, there is a technique by which you can change fears into faith and faith into possibilities, and a way to make these walls simply disappear.

Now, the other kind of walls I'm going to suggest, cautiously, are ones that God has built, which is to say they're walls over which we have no control whatever. There are, for example, diseases to which our bodies are susceptible, for which there is no cure, and as they progress, the wall of impossibility gets higher and longer and thicker. The fact that brain cells and lost limbs, for humans at least, do not regenerate, represents a wall. And the wall at the end, the one over which our bodies will not be able to leap, is a guarantee that whether you realise it or not, whether you like it or not, you are going to encounter at least a few walls before you're finished.

To find yourself “up against a wall” is a common expression in our society, and one that describes accurately a very common event in the human journey. Similarly, “banging your head against a wall”, is a common expression of frustration, and again, with graphic accuracy. Isn't it ironic that we humans, who love to look down on lower forms of life, like rats for example, behave so much worse when facing a wall? Any psychologist can tell you that a rat in a maze, when it encounters a dead-end wall, will do so three times and no more. Some humans can spend a whole lifetime in front of the same wall, staring at the same spot, with foreheads bleeding, wondering why the pain won't stop. We Christians really do need to learn how to handle the walls, how to approach them without flattening our foreheads, how to face

them without losing our cool—or our faith. And once again, as with Giants, Thorns and Tongues, the first thing we need to do is to get some strategy from the Bible.

Hopefully, you're still holding onto that nugget of strategy from our pep talk—about our impossibilities and God's possibilities. That's the one we'll need to pull out most often. And let's brighten that one up with Paul's illustration. That occasion early in his missionary career, when Paul really wanted to go northeast, but the Spirit wouldn't let him, must have been a big frustration for Paul. You see, I'm convinced that Paul had to overcome some fairly intense opposition and that he had to work harder than most to get where he was, that is, in charge of his own mission program rather than merely taking orders from the Jerusalem "head office". I am equally convinced that Paul was just as stubborn as they come, that he had a forehead built for bashing down walls, and that he could fight like a Tasmanian devil. That wall across his path would have been especially frustrating for him. But look what happened in the story, and look what he learned. Where one door was indeed closed, another opened wide. God turned him around, changed his direction, put a possibility in his grasp in place of the impossibility he couldn't grasp, and what happened was a ministry in Macedonia far more successful, more gratifying and encouraging to Paul than he ever could have imagined. And the success and faithfulness of that Macedonian church had a lot more to do with the ultimate survival and growth of Christianity than most of the other churches Paul worked so hard to establish. And there's another dimension for our strategy on walls: it's *precisely* where we can't see anything but the impossible, that you really want to see what God can see. The possibility that God is offering to you, in the place of the impossibility that's got you stopped in your tracks—that's the one you don't want to miss. That's going to be a big one, and there's a good chance it's going to involve a lot more people than yourself.

Here's another element of biblical strategy about walls. You need to identify them, and their source. If the wall is one that you have made, if it's built with fears as thick as bricks, then there is a solution. But don't get tricked into using your head for the wrong purpose. You don't out-muscle a wall any more than you can out-wrestle a giant. Stand back from your wall, put your finger on the fear that built it, and then turn that fear over to the power of Christ. Open it up to the power of his faith, and watch what happens to that wall.

If the wall is not one of your own construction, if it comes as part of the landscape of life, there is a solution—there is a way to turn impossibilities into new possibilities—but this one may be a little more difficult. The reason is that, in order to do anything about this kind of wall, we have to give complete control to God. For some folks, that's a pretty hard thing to do. But

here's the fact: we won't be able to see anything but the impossibility until we accept, through faith, God's vantage point and vision. There's a simple analogy for this lesson, and if they had had airplanes in Bible times (and they should have, because Pontius was already a *Pilate*), I'm sure someone, maybe Jesus, certainly Paul, would have used this illustration. The people who fly planes, and especially the pilots who fly the big ones, know there are going to be times when it's impossible to see where you're flying. There will be times when the clouds are so thick or the night so black, that if you relied on your own vision and judgment, you would ditch the plane every time. What you do when it becomes impossible for you to fly is this: you trust your *instruments*. You switch on the radar and proceed on a different kind of vision. You trust your altimeter and your compass. You give the controls to your instruments, you go ahead on pure trust, and the wall of impossibility gives way a very dependable and exciting possibility.

The toughest walls we Christians will ever face, the ones that will not move out of our way, are the most deceptive things in Creation. From our side, the human side, they are pure unchangeable impossibility, and the closer you get to them, the less you can see of anything else. When you stand toe to toe with an impossibility, you can't see anything else. And yet, from the other side, seen as God sees them, these things are nothing but possibilities—pure possibilities so great and glorious that we can't even imagine. But to know this, and to gain strength from knowing it, you have to learn to “fly on your instruments”. You have to take your hands off the controls. You have to give the controls to God's vision and God's plan.

There are things that are impossible for us. And we beat, bloody and bury ourselves until we learn to accept that, and until we accept the grace by which to accept the impossible. With God, and with the faith to fly on God's instruments, it's all possibility. That's the very secret of salvation, of which Jesus spoke when his disciples asked, “Who can possibly be saved?” That's the secret you need to know if you want to see through your walls, or perhaps peek over them, and certainly if you want to live through the encounter with them. God has a different view of the situation, and he certainly has in mind for us something far more exciting than standing, motionless and powerless, in front of a wall.

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