

At the Movies: 3. Apollo 13

Luke 18:1-8 and Psalm 62:5-6

September 4, 2022

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Are you familiar with NASA's renewed efforts to return to the moon for the first time since 1972? The Artemis 1 rocket was scheduled to launch for the second time this week just yesterday but has been canceled due to a hydrogen leak. Artemis 1 is taller than the Statue of Liberty and has 55 motors and engines that will lift this 600-million-pound rocket into space with the goal of returning to the moon. The plan is to set up a base camp there as a jumping off point to Mars with the goal of having humans on Mars by late 2030's or early 2040's. I just hope I live long enough to see that.

Are you old enough to have lived through the events of Apollo 13, do you remember where you were when the news of this ill-fated mission was shared with the world? My family was living outside Boston, and I was 9 years old. I distinctly recall the big, console tube television, the shag carpet and the dark paneling in our family room. While I was too young to understand the critical nature of this event, I knew by my parents' reaction this was serious. For those who haven't seen the movie or remember the event, this is the story of the 1970's Apollo 13 mission that was crippled by an explosion while en route to the moon. This is a true story of an incredible team of astronauts, as well as the incredible team of flight controllers, who worked round the clock in shifts for 87 hours to bring the three astronauts home.

Apollo 13 was the United States' third mission to land humans on the moon. Launched on April 11, 1970, it followed less than a year after Neil Armstrong's successful first lunar landing and famous, "One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind." Commander Jim Lovell, a former US navy test pilot and spaceflight veteran, led a crew of two rookie astronauts, Jack Swigert and Fred Haise. Things had gone sideways even before launch. Swigert was a late inclusion in the crew, having been swapped in at the last moment to replace his colleague Ken Mattingly who had been exposed to a case of German measles. Just fifty-six hours into the mission, with the crew nearly 200,000 miles from Earth, an explosion in one of Apollo 13's two oxygen tanks left the command module fatally damaged. Coasting in space, with alarms flashing all around them, bleeding oxygen and losing electrical power, Lovell, Swigert and Haise suddenly found themselves in deep trouble.

Well, the lunar landing was called off and over the next four days, the crew and mission control would find themselves fending off deadly threats repeatedly. They would solve problems one day, only to discover a host of new complications that might kill the crew the next. But they kept working together, across hundreds of thousands of miles of empty space, with everything against them, until they got the crew all the way back. Seven days later, on April 17, Apollo 13's rescue was completed by an elite mission control team led by flight director, Gene Kranz, for whom "failure was not an option". Kranz skillfully and calmly executed the rescue without any doubts that it would succeed.

But you only have to listen to the opening hours of the mission control recordings and the space-to-ground radio transmissions to know that was not the exactly the case. It was Kranz's exemplary leadership that got them through that first hour. Masterfully, he kept his team and the vehicle together, buying time enough to start solving the problem. When reviewing the response to sudden crises in our lives, we often overlook that chaotic period, simply because it has little real structure and doesn't appear to move things forward. But preventing this team from disintegrating in the face of an overwhelming challenge was a feat in itself, especially when we

realize that the average age of this mission control team was 27; some had just graduated from college.

“Failure is not an option” could be the greatest rallying cry of a leader. It forces the person and everyone involved to focus on the goal instead of the obstacles. It focuses everyone on achievement. It instills confidence and courage. It instills hope. And tenacity might be one of the most admirable characters a person can possess. Tenacity is “the ability to be determined to do or achieve something regardless of any setbacks.” A Harvard Business School study found that people who experience meaningful work are better both at recovering from setbacks and at viewing setbacks as learning opportunities. So when those setbacks occur, they refocus the situation by asking, “What could I have done differently? What will I do differently next time?”

Throughout our lives, there will be obstacles, setbacks, challenges but by developing tenacity, we can give ourselves the fuel to keep going and to have hope. Hope will help in the short term to overcome the daily distractions. And it will help us long-term as we stay focused and motivated to achieve our goal. Today, we will dig into this parable about the widow and the judge and what Jesus meant when he said, **pray continually and do not be discouraged**, the kind of tenacity that sees hardship as a pathway to success.

A marginalized person in her day, the persistent widow had no power relationships on which she could rely. She had absolutely no cultural advantage to brag about, no strings to pull, no names to speed dial. Nothing. Due to cultural expectations concerning a woman’s virginity and with very few options for self-sufficiency, women at that time tended to marry quite early — as early as their teens. Husbands were the figurehead of the ancient power structure, and due to this responsibility, they tended to marry later, in their 20s and 30s. This age gap meant that eventually many wives ended up as widows, leaving them without power or a way of providing for themselves.

The Law of Moses dictated that the husband’s immediate family and the community of faith were responsible for these women. In hearing this story, Jesus’ audience would have asked: *Why was there nobody but this judge who could help this woman?* Either she had no other family or community, or they were ignoring her or perhaps, dodging their responsibility. The point in the parable is that there is only one advocate for this woman — the judge.

Psalm 62, verses 5-6: I must find rest in God only, because my hope comes from him! Only God is my rock and my salvation—my stronghold!—I will not be shaken.

We have only one true advocate to whom we can turn with life problem. While God may use our family and community to minister to us, God is our only hope.

Jesus uses a classic form of storytelling from his day — the argument from lesser to greater. He begins with the lesser judge, this judge who doesn’t believe in God and couldn’t give a rip about spiritual things. He’s just a guy with an opinion, answering only to himself. He doesn’t care about people, just the system of do’s and don’ts.

If this really is her only hope, the widow should feel pretty hopeless. Nonetheless — she babbles on and on, each day waiting for the judge to arrive at his office in the morning, and being the last face he sees as he leaves for his comfortable home life. She is badgering. She’s practicing justice by irritation.

Jesus points out how if *this* hypothetical judge with *those* motivations will grant justice in response to persistence, how much easier is it for us to have confidence in *THE* Judge with *Divine* motivations will respond likewise?

In this parable, there are 2 things for us to take away: belief in God's justice and the value of tenacity in securing it.

Since disciples then and now (I'm including myself in this statement) can be a bit slow, Jesus comes out of the gate with the meaning of the story, which is the "need to pray always and not to lose heart." At this moment, Jesus was teaching, so he wasn't actually praying at that very moment. "Pray always" has a symbolic meaning. The point here isn't the quantity of time. It's the quality of time — to pray regularly and with consistency.

Whenever our hearts are affected by a friend's story, by a sermon's message, by what is read online or in the newspaper, by what is experienced at work, by what the television reports about the other side of the globe, we pray. Prayer can be like a reflex in the body. Like when we step on something sharp, and we instantly put all our weight on the other foot. It is natural and immediate. With practice, prayer can eventually become like this. And so Jesus encourages us to not lose heart. To lose our enthusiasm for prayer and become discouraged, to lose hope, is to enter a dark state of the soul. When facing evil, brokenness, loss, and injustice, the last thing we need to do is to give hope. When praying for the sick relative, the obstinate boss or the desired relationship, our only *real* option is to rely on God.

Jesus goes on to address our beliefs about justice. He says that the persistent receive justice quickly and without delay. Really? Quickly? It has been over 2,000 years since this parable, so what's with this idea of "quickly"? Where is justice when war, school shootings and world hunger litter our headlines? And how does it work that justice comes quickly when the poor and oppressed are still calling out for relief and for the most part, don't seem to be appreciatively closer to a world of justice and compassion? And yet we are commanded to persist in seeking it?

The answer is two-fold: *already and not yet*. In John 16:33 Jesus said, "*I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.*" As Christians, we stand in a tension. A sin-tainted world will always provide injustices, but we have hope that God uses his truth and his followers to bring redemption to these places. Justice has **already** come through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

But there is also a **not-yet** element to this justice. Confused by the carefree life of ungodly people, the psalmist comes to a *not-yet* reflection on God's justice: "*But when I tried to understand these things, it just seemed like hard work until I entered God's sanctuary and understood what would happen to the wicked.*" (Psalm 73:16-17). Their end is the final judgment of God. Only God controls and dispenses perfect justice. Author N.T. Wright describe our hopes for God's intervention against brokenness like this: "We're like moths trying to fly to the moon. We all know there's something called justice, but we can't quite get to it." While we're often left longing for things in this life to be put right, this very longing shows that our hearts are beating with God's heart. And it's this longing with which our prayers are made.

During the pandemic, people found new and inspiring ways to survive by sharing their stories of hope. A mobile mural titled, *Healing Reflections*, is a collection of stories & experiences compiled from 2020-21 from staff and community of the Mayo Clinic Health System. Each piece from the collection includes a story from a Mayo employee and/or community member as well as a piece of art inspired by the story teller's experiences. Themes touched-on within the collection include healing, resilience, inclusion, diversity, hope, and economic hardship throughout and beyond the COVID pandemic. The goal of this project was to not only represent

a historic time, but to offer hope by gaining insight and understanding into another's experiences and to foster healing through connection with other people. *Healing Reflection* is trying to not only tell the stories of its contributors but the story of humanity. Each of us has played a role in the collective cultural experience that continues to define the COVID pandemic. Though our experiences may vary greatly, it can be said that over the past two and a half years we have all experienced isolation to some degree. As a result, we've all had to learn how to be resilient and find hope in the face of the unknown.

During the Apollo 13 crisis, an old interview from 1950 aired in which Jim Lovell talked about hope and in it he said, "You never know what events are going to transpire to get you home." Romans 5:2-5 *"We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."* In the very early hours of this crisis, Gene Kranz said, "I believe this going to be our finest hour." May this also be so for you as you stay focused what it means to pray continually with a strong heart and to find your way home.

Let us pray: Loving God, you have given us the gift of another day and another opportunity to trust you with our very lives. Thank you for always being our faithful advocate. Help us to work together to bring justice and hope to a hurting world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 4, 2022

Weekly Prayer

O God, who is greater than the most powerful forces in this world, enable me to be still and know that You are God. O Lord, who answers out of the whirlwind of everyday life, breathe in me Your Holy Spirit to strengthen, comfort, and guide me in the midst of the storm. O still, small voice, speak to me today that I might be drawn closer to you and learn to trust you more. Amen.

This week's readings relate to the themes found in the movie, *Apollo 13*, that was the basis for the sermon given on September 4.

Monday, September 5

Scripture: Nehemiah 1:1-11

These are the words of Nehemiah, Hachaliah's son.

In the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in the fortress city of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came with some other men from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had escaped and survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They told me, "Those in the province who survived the captivity are in great trouble and shame! The wall around Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire!"

When I heard this news, I sat down and wept. I mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I said: "Lord God of heaven, great and awesome God, you are the one who keeps covenant and is truly faithful to those who love you and keep your commandments. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, which I now pray before you night and day for your servants, the people of Israel. "I confess the sins of the people of Israel, which we have committed against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have wronged you greatly. We haven't kept the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. "Remember the word that you gave to your servant Moses when you said, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you

return to me and keep my commandments by really doing them, then, even though your outcasts live under distant skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.' They are your servants and your people. They are the ones whom you have redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. "Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in honoring your name. Please give success to your servant today and grant him favor in the presence of this man!"

Observation

Apollo 13 is a movie that tells the true story of our astronauts: commander Jim Lovell, Fred Haise, Ken Mattingly, and Jack Swigert. If all goes well, they would be the second crew to reach the moon in April 1970. Early in the movie, they are watching the television broadcast as Neil Armstrong becomes the first person to set foot on the moon. In his now infamous words, Armstrong says, "One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind."

Application

That the United States sent astronauts to the moon was the fulfillment of a seemingly impossible vision. The Apollo 13 crew also has a vision. Earlier this summer, we studied the life of Nehemiah. In today's reading, Nehemiah was getting ready to receive God's vision. He recognized the problem, and he waited for God's direction. When have you been ready to serve in response to a need? What would it take for you to say, "I am willing to do whatever you ask"?

Prayer

Gracious and all-powerful God, you are always faithful. I can always rely on your constant presence and unconditional love. May your love for me move me and empower me to live responsibly for your purposes. Let me seek this day to serve rather than to be served. Amen.

Tuesday, September 6

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith.

By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible.

Observation

Ken Mattingly is sidelined because of his exposure to measles. Jim Lovell and his fellow astronauts launch into space on the Apollo mission. We hear the words, "We have lift-off." The facial expressions of the astronauts show a mixture of emotions from fear to excitement. They are not the first to enter outer space. They know the risks, but they also have a greater purpose.

Application

In the face of the unknown and circumstances beyond our control, we must lean into faith. The writer of Hebrews provides a description of how faith functions. Most of the twelfth chapter presents faithful examples to be imitated. Even when you cannot see what is promised, you can know that God will make it happen. When have you leaned into faith in the face of circumstances beyond your control? How does faith function in your life?

Prayer

God, I am so grateful for your unfailing presence and love. Help me to lean into your promise even when life feels overwhelming to me. Let my faith in you be a source of encouragement to those around me. Amen.

Wednesday, September 7

Scripture: John 21:4-14

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus. Jesus called to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." He said, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren't far from shore, only about one hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you've just caught." Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn't torn, even with so many fish. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Observation

"Houston, we have a problem." Within hours after liftoff on April 13, 1970, an explosion crippled the Apollo 13 spacecraft. The men had dreamed of walking on the moon. Now they face the uncertainty of never walking on earth again. Their mission changed from getting to the moon to getting home. Gene Kranz, Apollo 13 flight director, tells his co-workers, "Failure is not an option." His determination helps guide the spaceship home.

Application

Surely the disciples faced a future very different from what they had imagined before Jesus' crucifixion. In today's reading, the disciples have returned to fishing which is what they had been doing before Jesus entered their lives. Lost and alone, afraid for what might be, the disciples gradually realize that Jesus is still alongside them and the skills they brought to fishing will become resources for a new mission. When have you been surprised that God is with you? Maybe a sunrise or a walk through nature that suddenly gave you a sense that God is here. Or a moment with a friend or family and the realization that you are not alone. When have you seen God?

Prayer

God, thank you for the gift of this day. As I move through this day, give me fresh eyes to see that even in the ordinary, your hand is present to guide me. Amen.

Thursday, September 8

Scripture: John 17:3, 4-11

This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent.

I have glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I shared with you before the world was created. "I have revealed

your name to the people you gave me from this world. They were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. This is because I gave them the words that you gave me, and they received them. They truly understood that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. "I'm praying for them. I'm not praying for the world but for those you gave me, because they are yours. Everything that is mine is yours and everything that is yours is mine; I have been glorified in them. I'm no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I'm coming to you. Holy Father, watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one.

Observation

Gene Kranz, Apollo 13 flight director, gathered together his team to find solutions to bring the Apollo 13 crew home. Together, they worked out processes to keep the astronauts alive. Then the space crew carried out the plans. The 87 hours between the explosion and splashdown were an amazing display of teamwork.

Application

When Jesus prayed in John 17:11, "that they will be one just as we are one," he was stating that the same nature and character that united him with his Father would also unify believers. As a consequence of a diversity of specialists being able to work together, unified by the common purpose of the "salvation" of the three astronauts and able to translate theoretical ideas into actual solutions, the Apollo 13 crew all returned to earth safely, six days after launch. In today's world, it seems the focus is too often on what divides us. What might change if the focus was placed on what united us?

Prayer

God, you sent Jesus into this world to draw us all closer to you. Rather than looking for differences, help me to focus on what I share in common with others. Remind me that all are created and loved by you. Amen.

Friday, September 9

Scripture: John 1:14-18

The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.

We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.

John testified about him, crying out, "This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'"

From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace;
as the Law was given through Moses,
so grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God.

God the only Son,
who is at the Father's side,
has made God known.

Observation

Sidelined from the original crew, Ken Mattingly felt rejected and insignificant. Yet when the explosion suddenly changed the mission, he became the right person in the right place at the

right time. He simulated the return to earth in a training module. He becomes the troubled astronauts' "salvation." Working against the clock because the spacecraft is running low on fuel, he frantically devises a plan to rescue his fellow astronauts.

Application

While trying to develop instructions, Mattingly furiously tells his co-worker, "Give me only what they have up there." By reversing this quote, perhaps God was saying, "Give me only what they have down there." In Jesus, God limited himself in human flesh. "The Word became flesh and made his home among us." God chose to enter this world in a form that could be seen and heard and understood. God knows how it feels to be you! How does this give you confidence and hope?

Prayer

Thank you, God, for sending Jesus into this world to experience human existence. You know how it feels to experience joy, sadness, pain, and hope. Stay close to me and help me to feel your unending love each day. Amen.

Saturday, September 10

Scripture: Romans 5:2-5

We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Observation

On day six of the Apollo 13 mission, the astronauts needed to make a critical course correction. If they failed, they might never return to earth. To conserve power, the onboard computer that steered the craft had been shut down. Yet, the astronauts needed to conduct a 39 second burst of the main engine. How to steer? Jim Lovell determined that if they could keep a fixed point in view through their tiny window, they could steer the craft manually. That focal point turned out to be their destination – earth.

Application

To get safely home, the crew needed to keep their destination in the cross hairs of their vision. What is your focus? How does that focus cause you to serve in this world? As Jim Lovell says in the movie, "I believe this is going to be our finest hour." May it also be so for you as you stay focused on what will lead you home.

Prayer

Lord God, you have given me another day and another opportunity to live fully for you. Once again, I give my life to you, knowing that you have poured your love into my heart through the Holy Spirit. Amen.