

February 18, 2018 – Darkest Hour

Mark 8:31-38

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the first Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." This pilgrimage through popular cinema is an opportunity to theologically and spiritually explore some of the movies that are nominated for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards. We are starting with a film called "Darkest Hour." How many of you have had a chance to see this movie?

I'm not going to spend a lot of time explaining the plot, but I do need to give you a brief synopsis. It is a war film and it is based on the true story of Winston Churchill's first month as the Prime Minister of Britain. It is May 1940, the fall of France is imminent, and Britain faces its darkest hour as the threat of Nazi invasion looms. The Allied army is cornered on the beaches of Dunkirk, and the navy is scrambling to evacuate as many soldiers as possible. Churchill has a choice to make: whether to negotiate peace with Hitler and save the British people at what could be a terrible cost OR to rally the nation and fight on against incredible odds.

This is history so, of course, there is no surprise ending. I don't have to give you a "spoiler alert" when I remind you that Churchill chose to continue to fight Hitler's army. This movie is about the Prime Minister's struggle to make that decision. What makes the movie fascinating to watch is the glimpse that we are given into

the personal life and thoughts of a man who has become, for many, a shining example of a great leader.

So let's talk about leadership. Leadership is not easy. Winston Churchill knew when he accepted the position of Prime Minister that he was taking the helm of a sinking ship and yet he chose to take it anyway. He knew that he would have a difficult choice to make and that when he made it he would have to convince the rest of Britain to follow his lead. How do you convince a nation that they should follow you into peace at a terrible cost or into a seemingly unwinnable fight?

His situation is, in some ways, similar to the one that Jesus and his disciples faced nearly 2000 years earlier. In today's scripture passage Jesus told his disciples that he would suffer, be rejected by the Jewish leaders, be put to death and rise again, three days later. Jesus and his disciples were, in many ways, also on a sinking ship.

When Peter heard this news he took Jesus aside and said, "What you are talking about? Why are you saying this?" He obviously did not want to hear Jesus' scary prediction of his future. But Jesus didn't try to make him feel better; in fact, his response was even harsher, "Get out of my sight, you Satan!" And then Jesus went to say "If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross and follow in my footsteps. If you would save your life, you'll lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you'll save it."

The crazy thing is that Peter and the other disciples continued to follow Jesus even after he spoke those words. Why would you follow someone who was walking straight towards pain and suffering? Why would you stay with a leader who was asking you to deny yourself and to lose your life for their sake?

This week, as I explored this question for myself, I came across a poem by a man named William Ayot. It's called *The Contract, A word from the led*

And in the end we follow them –
not because we are paid,
not because we see some advantage,
not because of the things they have accomplished,
not even because of the dreams they dream
but simply because of who they are:

the man, the woman, the leader, the boss
standing up there when the wave hits the rock,
passing out faith and confidence like life jackets,
knowing the currents, holding the doubts,
imagining the delights and terrors of every landfall:
captain, pirate, and parent by turns,
the bearer of our countless hopes and expectations.
We give them our trust. We give them our effort.
What we ask in return is that they stay true.

The disciples followed Jesus because of who he was. They didn't always agree with him, often they didn't even understand what he saying, but they followed him anyway. They followed him because they knew that he would stay true. They knew that Jesus was guided by a compass that never wavered, a compass that would keep them on the right course. They knew that his connection to the sacred was so strong that they could trust him even when he was asking them to do something they didn't want to do. They knew that when Jesus needed

guidance he went straight to the Holy Mystery, to his Abba, to God, to the only true source of light and love.

But we can't all be like Jesus, can we? But we can look for leaders and we can be leaders who are struggling to stay true. In the movie, *Darkest Hour*, Winston Churchill was about as far from Jesus, or at least the Jesus of my understanding, than you can imagine. He was a most imperfect human being: he drank too much, was grossly overweight, smoked a huge cigar, was often rude and overbearing and even had a habit of dictating letters to his secretary while he was still in bed.. He made many mistakes in his personal life and in his work. And yet, he was also someone that people respected and followed.

I believe Winston Churchill was a great leader because he struggled to stay true. Despite having an incredible gift as an orator, he was also wise enough to take time to listen. He made a point of creating a war cabinet with people who held different views than his own, so that their voices would also be a part of the debate. He shared his deepest doubts with his wife and listened as she offered both criticism and encouragement. He was able to be vulnerable and share his fear with the King and then to hear the monarch's wise counsel. In one scene in the movie, Churchill even rides the underground in order to listen to the thoughts and the feelings of some of the people of London. And after weighing the widely varied opinions of those around him, Churchill had the strength of character to follow his own gut, to listen to that still small voice within him, and to be true to himself.

Many of the people of Britain no doubt disagreed with his decision, but they followed Winston Churchill into battle because they could see that he was telling them the truth as he knew it. He didn't tell them it was going to be easy, in fact he made it clear that this could be the end for Britain. He said, "We have before us many, many long months of struggle and suffering." But they followed him anyway.

As Christians, we follow Jesus not because we think the path is easy, but because we believe in his vision of peace of justice. We follow Jesus and work to stay true by dropping all the false masks that we wear and facing our own fears and vulnerabilities. We follow Jesus and work to stay true by listening and by discerning the call of the Spirit in our lives. We follow Jesus and work to stay true so that we can be leaders too.