

## **2025 03 16 – *A Complete Unknown***

**Scripture: Luke 13:31-35** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today is the second Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the second Sunday of this year's Lenten Movie Series. Together, we are theologically and spiritually exploring some of the movies that were nominated for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards. Today, we will be talking a movie called *A Complete Unknown*. Over twenty of us watched this movie on Friday afternoon here at the church and some of you may have seen it online or in the cinema. How many of you have had a chance to see this film? What did you think of it?

*A Complete Unknown* is the story of Bob Dylan's first few years in the music industry. It is biographical; though they do take liberties with the timeline. It is musical; nearly every scene contains all or part of one of his songs. And it is a drama that explores many of the relationships that Dylan started and ended during that time.

The movie begins with Bob Dylan arriving in New York as a complete unknown. He has travelled from Minnesota with nothing. Dylan immediately seeks out his idol, Woody Guthrie, who is dying of Huntington's Disease. In Woody's hospital room he also meets Pete Seeger, another famous folk singer. Pete invites him home and then begins to introduce Bob to the folk music scene in New York City. Bob Dylan's talent for writing lyrics and composing music is obvious to everyone who hears him sing. It doesn't take long for Dylan to get a record deal and within a couple of years he is famous.

The time is the early 1960's. The U.S. is in a Cold War with the Soviet Union and Martin Luther King Jr. is leading a non-violent Civil Rights movement. Bob Dylan is writing songs that are a commentary on the social issues of the day, songs that protest injustice and war. He writes lyrics like these from *Blowing in the Wind*:

Yes, and how many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
And how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows  
That too many people have died?

Through his songs, Dylan becomes one of the key voices of the protest movements of the 1960's. To his followers, his fans, he is a prophet.

Today's scripture reading is also about a prophet. The prophet that we follow, the prophet, the rabbi, the healer that we call Jesus. Jesus was also on his way from the small towns of Galilee to the big city of Jerusalem. Like Dylan he was spreading words of peace and justice, he was spreading a message of love and understanding. Like Dylan, up to this point, Jesus' time in the spotlight had been relatively short. His fame had been building for less than three years.

But in that short time, Jesus' message had reached the ears of powerful men. The local Roman Ruler and the Jewish high priests were both worried about the message of good news that Jesus was sharing with the poor and the marginalized people of Galilee and Judea. They were worried about the size of the crowds that he was attracting. They were worried about a possible uprising, a possible shift in the power dynamics of their region. They were worried about

losing their own wealth and prestige. They were doing very well, thank you, in the current system of oppression and didn't see a need for change.

Jesus was aware of the concern that his message was creating. His cousin John the baptizer, a prophet in his own right, had already been killed by Herod's family. Jesus knew that Jerusalem was a dangerous place to go. He knew that some of the ancient prophets of the Hebrew scriptures had been killed in Jerusalem by the rulers of their time.

So when some Pharisees warned Jesus to get out of town, and fast, because Herod, the King was trying to kill him, Jesus was not surprised. His reply reminds me of some of the rhetoric of today's politics. He said, "Go tell that fox, 'Today and tomorrow, I'll be casting out devils and healing people, and on the third day I'll reach my goal.' " In other words, "I have a call, a ministry, that is based on my own values and I'm not about stop because of a few threats. I'm not about to hide from a lying, conniving, bully."

Jesus had a ministry of healing and teaching, a message of love and peace and justice that he was called to share with the people of Galilee and Judea and beyond. Jesus was willing to stand up to those who were content with the status quo. Jesus was willing to continue even if it meant his own life was in danger. I wonder how any of us would be willing to make a similar sacrifice for the values that we hold dear?

I'm not going to suggest that Bob Dylan is a Christ-like figure. What I can say is that he is an artist, an artist who at this early point in his career was just trying figure out his place in the world. He struggled with relationships, he seemed unable to reveal his true self to anyone. He often hurt those who loved him.

But what Bob Dylan knew was that he had to stay true to his himself and to his vision as an artist. He was willing to take a stand. Like a prophet, he had to follow that still small voice inside of him, even when it led him into conflict with those in power. In Dylan's case, he was breaking out of the acoustic genre that defined the folk music of his era. Dylan, despite the protests of those around him, created a band and started to record with an electric guitar and other rock instruments. For Dylan, it was not a matter of life and death, but rather a question of what this decision would mean for his career, his fame and fortune.

It takes courage to be who we are meant to be. It takes courage to say what we are called to say. These days, I follow quite a few blogs and Substack posts, in a attempt to understand what's happening in the world and to gain inspiration in order to move forward in this time of chaos and confusion. One of the emails I receive is from an author named Rev. Cameron Trimble. On February 19<sup>th</sup> of this year, she sent out a blog called "Acts of Courage." She wrote:

There are moments when life presents us with a choice: to stand firm in our integrity or to shrink back into silence. For many, the temptation to compromise is understandable—security, reputation, relationships, and even livelihood can be at stake. But then there are those who refuse to betray their conscience, who choose courage over comfort, truth over self-preservation. <https://substack.com/home/post/p-157340222>

Rev. Trimble goes on to give an example of one of the many people in the United States, including lawyers, and government officials, who have chosen to resign their positions rather than follow the unlawful, and often hateful, orders coming from the White House. Trimble continues saying,

Faith has always demanded this kind of courage. The prophets knew it when they stood before kings and called for justice. The disciples knew it when they chose Jesus' teachings over empire. Mystics have known it in every age—those who gaze deeply into love cannot help but defend it.

Jesus, I would argue, was both a mystic and a prophet. In today's reading, while accepting his probable fate at the hands of the leaders in Jerusalem, he was still able to express his love and his sorrow for them and for all his enemies as he lamented,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I wanted to gather your children together as a mother bird collects her babies under her wings—yet you refuse me!”

There is so much to lament in today's world. There is so much that can frustrate and anger us. And yet we are called to go on. We are called to speak and live our truth. We are called to act with courage. May we all be able to look back on our lives and write, as Bob Dylan did just five years ago,

“Well I'm the enemy of treason  
Enemy of strife  
I'm the enemy of the un-lived meaningless life  
I ain't no false prophet  
I just know what I know  
I go where only the lonely can go.”  
(from *False Prophet* by Bob Dylan (2020))

May it be so. Amen.