

## **Stand Before the Tanks**

*B Trinity Sunday--Is 6:1-8; Rom 8:12-17; John 3:1-17*

It is June 5, 1989. On a multi-lane thoroughfare that is strangely empty, one lone man plants himself in the path of a column of oncoming tanks. He waits with his arms down, thin and rumpled in his white shirt and dark slacks. Some yards away, the foremost tank slows to a halt which lurches back through the entire column. The man tries to wave the tank away, but this only turns out to be an opening bow in the ungainly dance which follows. The tank turns one way and the man sashays over to block its path. It turns the other way and the man scrambles back. All the while the machine is closing in until it pauses within feet of the man. It hulks over him. If it were to start forward now, even with just a tap on the gas pedal, the man would fold under it like a rag doll.

For a moment, nobody moves. Then the man climbs up onto the tank and holds a conversation with someone inside, perhaps trying to convince the driver not to proceed, not to continue participating in the Chinese military's brutal attack on its own, unarmed citizens, students mostly, protesting for basic democratic rights in Tiananmen square. Finally, several other civilians run up and pull the man away. The tanks roll on, and the man disappears into anonymity if not obscurity. Who was he? What happened to him afterwards? Was he rounded up by Chinese authorities? Was he jailed or executed like so many of the other protestors in those demonstrations? Did he escape, perhaps to Taiwan? Nobody knows. All we have is the uneasy hunch that any of these possible scenarios--exile, prison, death--would have exacted a heavy price for his brief display of pluck. All we have is this image of an ordinary person who, for several timeless minutes,

stood up and halted the machinery of state power in its onslaught against its own people. All we have is this enduring example of courage.

That example had its twentieth anniversary two days ago. And as we commemorate the bravery of that unknown man and his fellow pro-democracy demonstrators, our readings today remind us of how our faith also calls us to such courage in the face of brutal and unjust power. For example, Isaiah, one of the Bible's most courageous speakers of truth to power, inaugurates his prophetic career with the vision in today's Old Testament passage. In that vision he receives a live coal on his lips. That coal simultaneously performs two tasks: it cleanses him of the corruption of his society, and it motivates him to become God's volunteer to call that society back into covenant with God. So with the anointing comes a weighty responsibility. With the divine purification comes the call to risk life and reputation for divine justice. Likewise, in Romans, Paul celebrates our adoption by God "as joint heirs with Christ--*if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*" (italics mine). And our passage from John reminds us that following Christ means walking a path to the cross where he was executed--for what?--for standing up to the machinery of state power in its onslaught against its own people.

In other words, the twenty-year-old image of that young Chinese man, planting his own body in the path of a line of military tanks, risking everything for justice, is not just a nice picture that has nothing to do with us as Christians. It is an icon for the very lifestyle into which Jesus beckons us. It is the call that meets us inside of the faith we claim, to summon forth justice from oppression, and mercy from brutality, and peace from violence. And if that call does not fill us with trepidation, if it does not routinely

challenge and disturb us, then we have signed the baptismal covenant without reading the fine print. Or, for that matter, the bold print.

Speaking of signing the baptismal covenant, we are performing two baptisms today. We are claiming two more of God's beloved for God. We are initiating two more into this blessing and struggle we call the Christian faith. And conveniently enough, today's Bible readings are also profoundly baptismal. Isaiah's reception of the holy, cleansing fire that blots out his sin is very much a proto-baptism, prefiguring the holy, cleansing water that blots out sin in the gospels. Paul's reference to "dying" to an old way of life and receiving "a spirit of adoption" by God captures the meaning of what we do in baptism. And Jesus' statement that "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit" is about the clearest invitation into baptism as can be found anywhere in the Scriptures. Not only that, but, as we have already discussed, these passages are also clear that the baptism they describe has two sides. It is an adoption into grace *and* an initiation into responsibility. It is an induction into blessed assurance *and* an invitation into courageous speech and action. It is a promise of God's love for us *and* a call, in light of that love, to take on the unjust powers of the world. To stand before the tanks. To halt the machinery of state power in its onslaught against people. To risk our lives for God's vision.

So this baptism is a daunting undertaking. It asks much from us, to whom much has been given. But if our Bible readings underline this challenging truth, they also assure us that we are not alone. You see, today is also Trinity Sunday, the day on which the church celebrates the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine proclaims that God is one being made up of three persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--the very persons in whose

name we baptize. And the meaning of this mysterious claim is that God is fundamentally a God of community. God is a relational God. God exists not in a static oneness or even a binary twoness but in a dynamic many-ness with all the complex give and take that that suggests. And so we do not baptize anyone into a solitary journey. We do not baptize anyone onto some lonely thoroughfare toward prophetic courage. We baptize, always, into community, into the body of Christ, into the church, this strange collection of redeemed sinners, challenging and supporting each other, groping our way together into the call that baptism lays on us to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.