

Do you like suspenseful movies? If so, which films would be at the top of your list as the most suspenseful ever made? If you need help recalling some flicks that fall into this category, Google "Most suspenseful movies," and you'll be presented with several lists. Some of these include: *Silence of the Lambs*, *Jaws*, *Rear Window*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Psycho*, *The Shining*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Seven*, and *Scream*. And there are more.

Suspense is a tried-and-true element of storytelling, so it's often found in novels as well. Top New York literary agent Noah Lukeman says that, as long as a writer can maintain suspense in his or her stories, many readers will keep reading even if the plot is thin, and the character development is weak. This means suspense is an important tool for novelists.

Ian Irvine, Australian author of 29 novels, also says that a good story at the very least has a strong hero figure and an adversary. The tension and suspense derive from the struggle between the two and the uncertainty of the outcome and the suspense works if we, as readers, can align ourselves with, and feel sympathy for, the hero. Of course, the hero in our Gospel story this morning is, Jesus, and as a hero he is certain to have adversaries. As we witness in our narrative, his opponents or rivals appear to be some of his countrymen.

While visiting the temple in Jerusalem, "the Jews gathered around him" as the NRSV mildly puts it. Or, as other scholars put it, they "ringed about him," "they surrounded him preventing his escape and with hostile purpose." One translation reads, "The Jewish opposition circled around him." So, can you feel the tension mounting? Dramatic, intense tension and suspense!

Unexpectedly, however, in the story, it's these Jewish leaders who claim to be in suspense, and they're claiming that it's Jesus who has put them there! Seriously! "How long will you keep us in suspense?" they say to him. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." In their case, there likely was, in the minds of these

adversaries, some suspenseful mixture of fear and loathing regarding Jesus -- so much so, that these guys who had encircled Jesus picked up stones to hurl at the Rabbi. They wanted to kill him. And as we sit at the edge of our seats, our teeth grinding in anticipation we may wonder how Jesus can possibly escape? He's a goner for sure! But, no! John tells us that "he escaped from their hands."

Unfortunately our story lacks some of the finer details in that John doesn't supply us with an explanation as to how this happened. He leaves it to our imagination. In written stories, suspense is a *reader* concept; it's something that happens in the *reader*. So...what, then, does today's chapter say to us as we read it? This side of Easter, we likely have no sense of suspense about what happened to *Jesus*, neither in this incident, nor in the long run. But it may cause us to wonder, what will happen to us? In his response to the question about whether he was the Messiah, Jesus said, "I have told you, and you do not believe."

Ok, are any of us in that group, those *whose belief in Jesus* is either missing or shaky? Perhaps this is the problem. Deep down, we're a little confused about Jesus and the claims he makes. We haven't really made a commitment of the heart. We're curious, but not convinced. We're suspended between heaven and hell, faith and unbelief. We're wavering -- sitting on the fence -- and we're not sure on which side of the fence we're going to fall.

Or, perhaps there's some tension in our practice of faith right now. We know we haven't exactly behaved as though we are followers of Christ. We have some significant lifestyle issues. We give only lip service to some of the most basic practices of the faith, and, in our professional and personal lives, no one would ever suspect that we profess to be practicing Christians. We can almost hear some of the people surrounding us in our everyday lives saying things like *You? Ha! No way!* And this bothers us: we sense our life is in tension right now between what we want to do and what we actually do; between our ideals and our reality.

Perhaps there's tension about whether we should forgive someone who's hurt us, how we should handle a concern regarding a problem in our marriage, whether we should speak up at work about some practice that seems questionable, or whether we can give up some habit we already know is wrong or, at the very least, harmful for us. We may not use the word "suspense" about such matters, but if we're both hoping and fearing for ourselves -- the "heroes" of our own stories -- the word fits.

So what can we say about these things? Four things, at least: *First*, let's briefly talk about the question of *certainty*. Are we to live in suspense as to our eternal destination? Can we have some certainty about our salvation as the following hymn asserts? It's one many of us know practically by heart. *Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, Oh what a foretaste of glory divine, Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.* Then the Refrain: *This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Savior all the day long. This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Savior all the day long.*

Theologically, "blessed assurance" can be a thorny issue. But, really, *certainty* about one's salvation is probably more a matter of psychology than theology. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, used to argue that, if you weren't sure you were going to heaven, you were surely going to hell. But later, he moderated his views. Here's what he said: "When 50 years ago my brother Charles and I, in [the] simplicity of our hearts told the good people of England that unless they *knew* their sins were forgiven, they were under the wrath and curse of God, I marvel ... that they did not stone us!!!!"

So assurance may be more a matter of psychology, something that some of us find we are more tuned in to than others, or, like with Wesley, something that comes and goes. It may be a case in which some dramatic tension is a good thing. When certainty is not present, its absence may be a nudge from God to freshen our

relationship with him. And it's worth remembering that no less a Christian than Mother Teresa came to a place where she felt no assurance, but it didn't diminish her faithfulness to her calling.

*Second*, we should think about *what God has taught us* through Christ and how it applies to our existence. In other words, we should examine our lives in the light of Scripture because more often than not, we can find direction for our lives in the Bible. Jesus told his opponents that his sheep hear his voice and follow him. And since the Bible is one place where we hear his voice, if we follow it as faithfully as we can, we *are* part of the flock.

This reminds me of a statement attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "It's not what I don't understand about the Bible that troubles me, but what I do understand." If we spend time matching our lives to the parts of Scripture we do understand, it's likely that some of our suspense about our spiritual state will dissolve. But probably not all of it. Psychologically speaking, some of us have great difficulty letting go of the tension of uncertainty -- it's how we're made -- and we will continue to hope and fear for ourselves.

*Third*, what kind *suspense* do we find ourselves in? Remember that, although the Jewish leaders claimed Jesus was keeping them in suspense, Jesus shot back that, on the contrary, he had removed all the suspense many times. The fault lay not with any failure on Jesus' part, but lay, instead, with those who, apparently, did not have ears to hear, ears to listen. Could this be true of us? Do we feel some sort of tension and suspense in our lives, when the answers have already been provided? Perhaps we just haven't had our hearts and minds open to hear? And maybe we need to be mindful of what we've already been told.

Our Heavenly Father who gives us to Jesus is greater than any other power. There is nothing that can snatch us away from Jesus or from God. Our proclamation then can include all those forces and powers that would seek to

snatch us away from Jesus -- most notably our own sinfulness, the many forms of anguish we experience, and our ultimate deaths -- but God is more powerful than these. God may not make our sufferings go away, but we know for certain that they are not strong enough to separate us from Jesus.

If salvation belongs to Jesus' sheep --and thus being given eternal life by Jesus is dependent upon God and Jesus; then it is not completely dependent upon our faith, or our love, or our knowledge -- all of which can be at times somewhat unstable. Salvation is rooted in the Word of God which proclaims: "You have been chosen by God! You are part of Jesus' flock! You belong to Jesus! You are a sheep of God." As hearers we can choose to believe, or not believe these words. As hearers we can choose to follow up on what God has done for us or not.

We need to learn to trust our Creator, our Savior, our Redeemer! There's no need to wallow in, focus on, dwell upon, fixate or agitate about any uncertainty we might be dealing with. Let us get up and follow Jesus, even with whatever suspense or fear about our discipleship we may feel. After a while, that suspense won't feel so uncomfortable to us, and it can be the spark that fires us up, energizes us, and empowers us to do the work God has called us to do. So rather than being like the Jews in today's story that hear Jesus words, "I have told you, and you do not believe." Let's believe it, with the help of God's grace filled Spirit and move forward in peace!