

# John Wycliffe

(2Timothy 3:10-17)

Last week Marvel Universe added one more movie to their collection, this makes 21. How many have you seen? Your pastor's favorite movie is "Dr. Strange". For those of you who don't follow comics or movies, the newest entry is entitled "Captain Marvel". In the movie a young woman named Carol Danvers becomes a hero by using special skills obtained from experiences in the US Air force. She joins others to fight a bunch of aliens on earth, proving that she's up to the task.

The reason so many people enjoy an escape into science fiction has to do with reality. The darkness in our fallen world affects so many aspects of our lives. The senseless murders, unjust treatment of people and ongoing political news concerning corruption and collusion only fuels our desire for "everything to be made right" in the world; we need a hero!

In many ways our Christian faith gives us more than enough examples of those who have come before us and made contributions to our fallen world. Yet, some think of organized religion as an escape from reality. In truth the reason that many of our church members have become close over the years has to do with making it through REAL life challenges together. Hard times create a bond. When prayer and knowledge of Jesus forms their union, the connections are deeper.

It depends who you talk with whether our first person of faith was a hero or a villain. You know you've left a mark on the world if forty years after you've died your body is unearthed just so it can be burned and thrown into a river! John Wycliffe was raised on a sheep farm in Yorkshire England in the early 1330's. Though he was the oldest son, his father saw him unable to handle the physical rigors of farming, so he suggested he go to Oxford to become a parish priest.

At 15 years old John left home in September of 1345 he walked the two hundred miles to one of the world's great centers for learning. Oxford University. John's classes included grammar, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music theory, rhetoric, logic and philosophy, oh, and all were taught in Latin.

The students were all boys, dressed in colorful tunics, robes with a hood; the color depended on which residence you called home. If you're picturing Harry Potter, you're not too far off, just without the moving staircases and sorcery. At the end of three years of study students received oral examinations in which four professors asked questions from any of their disciplines. Fellow students were allowed to participate. If the student passed, they were permitted to begin the masters of arts degree which lasted another three years.

If one passed these even harder exams the University required the graduate student remain on campus for two more years to perform various administrative tasks. Then, after this time, one chose a specific course of study, medicine, law or theology. After five more years of study one could go on to obtain a doctorate, which required even more years of study and the most rigorous examinations.

Thus, any young man who entered Oxford at age fifteen might not receive his doctorate degree until his mid-thirties. As it was only  $\frac{1}{3}$  earned a bachelor's degree,  $\frac{1}{6}$  earned a master's degree, and even fewer made it to their doctorate. John Wycliffe was over forty years old when he achieved his doctorate.

The story of John Wycliffe involves more than book smarts. What historians refer to, as the "black death" was a deadly plague that lasted from 1348-1353. During this time John was a student at Oxford and because of its effects, often launched into priestly experiences. John gave last rites to many nameless victims. Many peasants saw this plague as a punishment from God. Bacterial infections carried by rats were the actual antagonist but this wouldn't be common knowledge for years, to the locals it was the end of the world, death was all around them!

From June to September in 1349, there were 290 deaths per day in London; eventually the sickness claimed 40% of England's largest city. In Oxford by 1350 30% of the university town's population was lost to disease. Interestingly, though faith in the institutional church waned, people's acts of faith did not. Because one never knew if they would become sick, many pilgrimages were made to religious shrines; people literally prepared to meet their maker on a daily basis.

The tension that existed among the people of England were also present in the church. In 1374, two years after Wycliffe earned his doctorate, John became rector of the parish in Lutterworth, a town east of Birmingham in south central England. A year later he was disappointed when he was overlooked for a position at Lincoln and as a bishop of Worcester. John learned what many of us clergyman do, that politics is not confined to governmental leaders.

Despite the effects of the Black Death Rome still required financial support from England, a nation now struggling to resist a possible French attack. Yet, Wycliffe told his local lord, John of Gaunt, to not give in to these demands. He argued that the church was already too wealthy and that Christ called his disciples to poverty, not wealth. If anyone should keep such taxes, it should be the locals.

As you can imagine, these opinions got Wycliffe into trouble, and he was brought to London to answer on charges of heresy. The hearing had hardly begun when accusations on both sides filled the chapel. John's most significant advocate, John of Gaunt, was quite vocal about the abuses of the church to his native England. When one of the Bishops offended Gaunt, he famously said, "*Rather than take such words from the Bishop I should drag him out of the court by the hair of his head.*" Soon there erupted an open brawl, bringing an end to the meeting.

Wycliffe later made a statement to the English parliament that the pope should choose between apostleship and kingship. If he preferred to be a king, let him claim nothing of us in the character of apostle; or if he was an apostle, he could not claim the gold." (John Wycliffe Ellen Caughey p. 70) Three months later, Pope Gregory XI issued five edicts against Wycliffe, in which he was called "*the master of errors.*"

At a later hearing before the archbishop at Lambeth Palace, Wycliffe replied, "*I am ready to defend my convictions even unto death.... I have followed the Sacred Scriptures and the holy doctors.*" He went on to say that the pope and the church

were second in authority to Scripture. Many consider these sentiments an early seed of what would become the Protestant reformation some 145 years later.

Again, as you may expect, this didn't sit well with the Roman Catholic Church but because of Wycliffe's popularity and a subsequent split in the papacy (the Great Schism of 1378, when rival popes were elected), John was only put under "house arrest" and left to pastor in his Lutterworth parish. His willingness to stand up to corruption, even in the highest offices of the church, made him a hero.

What can we learn from Wycliffe's life? First, what seemed like a weakness, his lack of physical prowess, actually worked to help him find his true calling. Sometimes what we think is a weakness can become the foundation upon which God can do great things. I'm sure many of us could recall moments in which we thought we had failed, only to be surprised by a newfound hope. The best superhero movies follow this pattern. Think of your favorite superhero, likely their story begins with a great obstacle that they must overcome, then, they become "the hero"...

In a Biblical way of speaking the persecutions that the writer of 2Timothy speaks of only work to make one, "*wise for salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus.*" (2Tim 3:15) We are made stronger in our commitments only after we're forced to defend them. Challenges to our beliefs only cultivate more commitment to Jesus, not less, more interest in spiritual renewal, not less.

Also, there are similarities between Wycliffe and the "times of difficulty" that Timothy faced as he lead the Christians in Ephesus. The passage, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching and reproach" would've been well known by the "herald of the Reformation", as John favored the authority of Holy Scripture over the politicized power of any Pope.

The image of an open Bible was selected for this week because Wycliffe worked on having the Bible translated into English. Believe it or not, at the time according to Roman Catholic law, translating the Bible into a "*common language*" was a crime punishable by death. Despite the threats to his life Wycliffe and a group of colleagues, committed themselves to making the word of God available to all.

John was a true hero "of the people", who never forgot where he came from. It seems obvious to us today-that we should have access to the Bible-as we read history backwards, but at the time it was highly controversial and even evil in many church-goers' eyes. Do we value the sacrifices made so that we can obtain and interpret Holy Scripture on our own? Let's get at this question another way.

What distinguishes NSPC from other churches (in Ellwood City)? If we are one of the results of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, why are **we** here? There are 7 Presbyterian Churches with an Ellwood City mailing address, what's our unique purpose/calling? Part of our history is geographical; most of our members live within 5 miles of the building, township folks needed their own church.

Though we, like many churches, were once larger, we've never been a BIG church with a big building or a big budget. We're unique in that we don't long for

days when we had many hundreds of people in worship because in our best years we had about what we have today, including a terrific preschool.

We don't face the steep decline that suffocates many churches in this region. We have families with children, new energy, creativity and commitment. **Yet**, as I see it, our challenge isn't getting people in the church, it's allowing our "cozy" neighborliness to grow into more than just a group of like-minded, middle class, middle aged married (or once married) folks. Our comfort is our challenge.

I've read the demographics, economic trends and forecast for our labor force and lifestyles. So, I *don't* expect us to become a suburban, multi-campus, multi-pastored, program driven, hip or happening, *seven days a week* church, but, I do believe there are aspects about being a faithful church that are eluding us.

Our vision is, "To know Jesus Christ and make Him Known." This is an active call to be **doing** something not just a slogan about being who we've always been. We offer ways to know (about) Jesus. In worship, Sunday school and youth group, this time of year we also offer midweek study (which will continue the reflection on each week's hero). We also make devotionals and wee worship leadership available to all.

Some of our folks gather for men's or women's Bible studies, some go on retreats or on a mission trip of local, regional or international variety. Some assist the elderly or homebound with acts of care and compassion. In an emergency some have opened their homes to a neighbor, others or are willing to assist with chores, cleaning or errands that they can't get done on their own. These are all good things.

We're naturally relational, but outside of planned activities, I often wonder how we can be more interactive in "making Jesus Known"? If, like John Wycliffe, our life says we're committed to the Jesus of Holy Scripture, does this show? Do we use the gifts that God has given us to serve? Jesus isn't limited to the four walls of this church. So, what are we doing to further the call *to make Him known*?

Seriously ask yourself: Within the last month, to whom have you made Jesus known? If you can't answer this with clarity then you're allowing the ease of a religious routine to become your religion. If we ever stop inviting friends, family or coworkers to church then, in time, we'll simply get smaller, older, less energetic and coast through the days instead of creating disciples for Jesus Christ.

I know we're not a big church with cutting edge marketing, a children's worship area with a rock wall and a coffee shop or a worship space with a smoke and light show, but many of the newer evangelical churches are making Jesus known with more intentionality than we are. They speak of making an impact and engaging their members in Biblical formation; that sounds like a church birthed out of the Reformation. We talk more about comfort than conviction.

My final challenge for us this morning is this: what if we used what some would see as a weakness-how well we know one another-and doubled down our efforts in engaging in spiritual growth? What would it look like to not only know one another's names but to make Jesus known in our everyday lives? This isn't something that a church or its Pastor can micro-manage; it's up to you.

What would you need to do differently were your, “life measured by scripture” as John Wycliffe said. He used his voice to defend his nation, his neighbors and his colleagues because of how he felt moved by the Holy Spirit. So if a scrawny English kid can be used by God to bring about reform within the empire that was the Roman Catholic Church of the fourteenth century, then we too can ***make Jesus known*** in our neck of the woods and beyond!

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

AMEN!