

“Rope-A-Dope”

John 18:1-12

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I admit to you: I’m not much into boxing. Yes, I am a sports junkie, but as it relates to this sport, I suppose I have gotten in touch with my feminine side because boxing to me seems so barbaric. The sole purpose is simply to beat the other person up—pummel the opponent into submission, inflict pain and suffering, beat him to a pulp. Do civilized people do this? And then there has emerged in recent years the latest craze, what has come to be known as Ultimate Fighting, which makes boxing look like pattie-cake. I just don’t get it, it’s so uncivilized.

But I do admit that when the “big one” happens—those once-in-a-blue-moon, over-the-top championship bouts—I too am prone to gather around the TV set and watch. To me it feels a little like slowing down at the scene of an accident to see the carnage. It’s a strange fascination. I remember the strangest fight of them all, when Mike Tyson bit off a chunk of Evander Holyfield’s ear. I remember the fight that was interrupted by a parachuting crazy man falling into the ring. And of course, I remember one of the greatest boxing matches of all time, the “Rumble in the Jungle,” on October 30, 1974, the heavyweight championship of the world that took place in Zaire, Africa. (*Video of crowd gathering and cheering at the fight*) The champ was brawler George Foreman versus the former champ, challenger Muhammad Ali.

Now for those who know anything about boxing, Ali was not a brawler. He could knock you out for sure, but he was more known for his quickness, his ability to absorb a punch, and for his smarts. Ali beat opponents by outsmarting them, and nowhere was this better demonstrated than in his fight with George Foreman. You see, Foreman was huge and he was known for delivering devastating bone-crushing blows. Folks figured that Foreman would do the same to Ali. But Ali had a plan, and he implemented it to perfection.

Here was his strategy. From the opening bell, Ali backed himself against the ropes. It may have looked like it was Foreman who made Ali go there, but no, Ali planned that strategy from the beginning. (*Film of Foreman pounding Ali as Ali stands against the ropes.*) With Ali on the ropes, for seven rounds, Foreman delivered one thunderous blow after another. It looked like Foreman was clearly winning and that Ali was totally at his mercy. For seven rounds, Ali stayed on the

ropes even as his trainer Angelo Dundee kept screaming to “Get off the ropes! Get off the ropes!” But Ali had his plan. He took every blow Foreman delivered, until he saw his opening. He realized that Foreman was now tiring and had reached a point of total exhaustion as he staggered across the ring. And to the surprise of everyone watching, suddenly, Ali, as if coming out of hibernation, threw a powerful right cross that landed perfectly (*Show film of Ali taking the punches but then coming back with the right cross. The announcer shouts, “Down goes Foreman,” and the crowd goes wild.*) Down to the floor went Foreman, in utter defeat. Ali had just regained his crown as the heavyweight boxing champion of the world.

Ali’s plan worked to perfection. Afterwards, he coined the strategy as the “rope-a-dope,” a plan where one purposely puts himself in what appears to be a losing position, causing the opposition to get tired and opening the door where one can then launch a counterattack to gain the victory. The “rope-a-dope,” who could have come up with such a crazy name and an even crazier plan of attack but the one who “floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee,” Muhammad Ali? Because of that fight, the rope-a-dope strategy became enshrined in boxing lexicon, and even has its own Wikipedia page today.

Now let’s change scenes as we come upon a reality that was a little more sobering. When you read the gospel accounts of Jesus’ last days leading up to his crucifixion, you could easily reach the conclusion that Jesus was totally at the mercy of his killers. You could say that Jesus was a helpless victim. But then, I believe, you would be wrong. Sure, Jesus was an innocent victim: falsely accused, unjustly tried and convicted in both Jewish and Roman courts. But please understand, especially as revealed in today’s reading of the arrest of Jesus from the Gospel of John, Jesus went to the cross intentionally. It was God’s “rope-a-dope.” It was God’s plan.

As we consider the events of Jesus’ passion—that is, his suffering and death—as here portrayed in the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, we see and we read that Jesus allowed Satan to unleash all he had (*Show here images from the movie of his suffering, especially of the crucifixion*). For hours, Jesus took the beatings, he absorbed the blows from the rod and then the 39 lashes from a flagellum. There was the crown of thorns and the carrying of his cross to the place of execution. And then there was the excruciating agony of the crucifixion itself. Jesus was nailed to the cross and for around six hours took everything that Satan could throw his way—until Satan, like George Foreman, had given everything he could. And then to the surprise of everyone, Jesus rose from the dead to defeat Satan forever.

We'll learn more about that final knock-out punch next week as we gather for worship on Easter.

Meanwhile, I contend that when Jesus was suffering on the cross, he was in complete control. The whole spectrum of power was arrayed against him, from Judas to the Roman soldiers to the guards from the priests and Pharisees. It was Jew and Gentile, secular and religious. But even this army of demonic power did not make Jesus a helpless victim.

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus even talked about his freedom and control even in the face of his impending death. He had said, "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father" (10:17-18). From the beginning, this was all part of God's plan.

The opening scene of John's account of Jesus' passion is chilling. But Jesus was clearly in command every step of the way, even at his arrest. Jesus had gathered the disciples in the Upper Room for the last supper as a celebration of Passover. He had sent Judas away quietly in the night after exposing who he was. Jesus then spent time talking to his disciples, encouraging them and praying for them. The exact words are recorded in John chapters 13-17 as Jesus' farewell discourse.

Jesus then along with his 11 followers crossed the Kidron Valley and entered the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas figured that Jesus would be there for that was where he often took his disciples to pray. John tells us that Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with the police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Imagine that scene with me—Judas coming to the garden with a detachment of soldiers. The Greek word here is *speira*, which was a band of Roman soldiers up to 600 in number.

All this for one man. It was like they were taking on Osama bin Laden. Well they had heard about this Jesus, the miracle worker, the one who could even raise a person from the dead. They probably believed that Jesus was in the garden hiding, and they would have to search every nook and cranny.

But as they came to confront Jesus, it was Jesus who confronted them. He wasn't hiding. He came forward and said, "Whom are you looking for?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they responded. And Jesus said, "I am he." The more literal translation, however, is simply, "I am." Now think about that. "I am," does that

sound familiar? Well it's the same words that God described Godself in the Old Testament when speaking to Moses from the burning bush, "I am who I am." The name reaches back to the preexistence of God.

Who is Jesus? Both here and back in John 1, Jesus was the word of God there from the beginning, who was with God and who was God. Then this word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth. Jesus was God in the flesh. And by just mentioning his name, "I am," amazingly, all of these soldiers, the text tells us, went sprawling to the ground. They came to overpower Jesus, but it was Jesus who had the power. It was Jesus fully in control.

I suppose it was somewhat an awkward moment. Jesus asked them again, "Whom are you looking for?" Imagine the soldiers amusingly picking themselves off the ground and saying, "Uhhhh, Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus responded, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go."

Once again, Jesus is the one taking control, demanding—or at least requesting—that his disciples go free. Jesus showed that he is the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep. They had come to arrest the 12, but Jesus made sure they were set free. He protected them. He was fully in control.

Next thing happens, Peter draws his sword. Matched up against 600 armed soldiers, and Peter is spoiling for a fight. He is ready to take them down. What was he thinking? I'll tell you what he was thinking. Peter knew who his leader was. He had seen Jesus walk on water and raise the dead. He knew what caused those soldiers to fall to their knees. He was ready to get it on! So he takes his sword in a fit of rage and cuts off the ear of a slave named Malchus. Impetuous Peter, the fireball. You gotta love his passion, but he is out of line. And Jesus, once again, takes control, and says, "Peter, put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

What John leaves out of his account but is found in Luke is that Jesus then went over to the slave Malchus, touched the wound, and immediately the ear was healed. Wow, imagine the power of that scene—the electricity—as all those soldiers witnessed a miracle before their very eyes. It could have easily gotten out of hand, but Jesus was fully in control, fully in command, setting the stage for his own execution. Wow.

“Put your sword away,” Jesus tells Peter. “Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” What is that cup? It is an awful cup. It is the cross. The cup means that Jesus willingly and freely offered himself up to be arrested, beaten senseless, falsely convicted, tortured, and finally killed in an absolutely agonizing death, as Jesus brought to completion the greatest act of love the world had ever seen. His words which closed out his death were, “It is finished.” *Fait accompli*. Mission accomplished!

All this was done to set God’s people free from sin. He did all this, very simply, to show us the incredible depth and breath of God’s love for us. He did it to open the door for us to live eternally with God, that we might be saved.

So as we worship this morning, the object of our worship is not some helpless victim. We worship the one who is the great “I am,” the almighty king of kings, the original master of the “rope-a-dope” game plan. Through Jesus Christ, out of weakness, God unleashed great strength and even greater love. As the prophet Isaiah had prophesied hundreds of years earlier about the coming messiah, “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). Thanks be to God. Amen.