

INVICTUS¹
Luke 2: 1-14
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
December 27, 2009

This annual gathering for worship on the Sunday after Christmas is always a wonderful mixture of the afterglow of Christmas, the celebration of a new year, and the welcoming home of many, including members of the youth group alumni, some of whom are helping with the service today. Coming home for Christmas is always a special time for the family, and by family I also mean the church family. So we welcome all of you who are home for Christmas.

I

Sol Invictus was the epithet given to the Roman sun god. It means “the Unconquered Sun,” and it was declared by Emperor Aurelian in 274 AD that the birthday of the sun should be celebrated on December 25, which was the first day when the days became detectably longer after the winter solstice. It was celebrated by the whole Roman Empire by the mid-4th century, and it surely placed the early Christian church in a dilemma. While everyone seemed to be celebrating the birthday of the sun on December 25 with twinkling lights and great feasts, what should Christians do?

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The answer, I believe, is clear. The church concluded that they should “baptize” the birthday of the sun into the birthday of Jesus. Why not? It was not deceptive, since no one in the early church had the foggiest notion when Jesus was born. There is no indication in the scriptures as to the time of year when he was born. There is no mention of snow or even cold weather in the stories told in Matthew and Luke. If they decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus on the same day that the rest of their neighbors were celebrating the birth of the sun, it enabled them to participate in the festivities of the rest of their world and at the same time to be distinctly Christian.

And, like a gift, the pagan celebration spoke of the sun as *Invictus*, unconquered, a word that also applied to Jesus. It was a natural merging of two celebrations, and the church has continued it since then. December 25 became our Christmas.

I hasten to add that there is not total agreement on this interpretation in the world of Christianity. There is a segment of the church, led specifically by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, who challenges this interpretation by arguing that the December 25 date was determined simply by calculating nine months beyond March 25, which is the date regarded by Catholics as the day of Jesus’ conception and celebrated as the Feast of the Annunciation. But that begs the question of how they determined the date of

his conception, and I don't care to go there. Believe what you want about that, but I tend to think that December 25 is an adopted date that was very convenient for the early church because it was the day when the Roman Empire celebrated *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun.

II

This year, just before Christmas, a new movie appeared in local theaters entitled *Invictus*, a movie that chronicles a part of the life of Nelson Mandela. Educated at a Wesleyan mission school and influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, Mandela spent almost 30 years in prison for being a freedom fighter. But on Sunday, February 11, 1990, he was released from prison, and four years later he was elected President of South Africa. That is where the movie begins.

When he was elected President, Mandela was faced with the daunting challenge of uniting a badly divided country in which resentments ran deep and mistrust was everywhere. There was pressure on him to take revenge on white people for the evils of apartheid. But Mandela had learned from Gandhi that any hope for the nation to survive depended on everyone being treated fairly and all people, of whatever color, having a stake in its success.

He had to find something that would refocus the nation on a common dream, and of all things, he chose the national rugby team as a symbol of unity. The amazing thing is that the rugby team, usually all white, had symbolized

the sharp division in the country. But Mandela was determined to use that popular sport to galvanize the whole nation into a common dream to win the world cup championship. His core supporters resisted his initiative and resented his commitment to forgiveness.

This movie is directed by Clint Eastwood, and many are aware that Eastwood has made forgiveness a theme in his works. In this movie he is dealing with the issue of forgiveness for racial hatred, a theme that is always pertinent. *Invictus* captures the racism of the whites who resent Mandela's presidency, and it captures the racism of the black South Africans who want nothing more than revenge. So the film rests on the foundation of racial conflict.

But here is where the title of the movie comes in. *Invictus*, unconquered, implies that racism need not dictate our behavior. It implies that any culture, any person, is able to conquer racism and live above it.

It calls to mind the poem entitled *Invictus*, written by William Henley in 1875 as he lay in a hospital bed, having had his foot amputated. He was a college student. He had just passed the Oxford exam that allowed him to become a Senior. But his diseased foot would not heal. Doctors declared that it had to be amputated just below the knee in order to save his life. In fact, the doctors suggested strongly that he should have BOTH feet amputated, as the

other one also had problems. But he refused, while at the same time he realized that the one foot had to go.

Those of you who are college students can imagine how this decision affected him. He was on the cusp of his adult life, and he had to make the decision to lose a foot! How does a rising college senior deal with this? Listen to his poem that he wrote from his hospital bed after the amputation.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

It turns out that Mandela had this poem written on a scrap of paper in his prison cell. In the movie, he gives the *Invictus* poem to the captain of the

South African rugby team before the start of the World Cup championship match.

III

There are some memorable lines in the movie that American Christians would do well to hear and heed at a time of great division in our country. One of them comes when Mandela tells the existing white presidential staff who are uncertain about their future in the new administration: “The past is past. We look to the future now.”

Another memorable line in the movie comes when Mandela tells his black security chief, who objects to the presence of white body guards: “Forgiveness starts here. Forgiveness liberates the soul. It removes fear. That is why it is such a powerful weapon.”

Every church needs to look to the future now. We will be doing that in many ways as we enter the new year. And may I suggest that forgiveness also be a part of the new year. As Mandela says in the movie, “It liberates the soul. It removes fear.”

We have just celebrated the birth of Christ *Invictus*, the Unconquered Son. That celebration comes in the darkest time of year because it is all about the birth of a new hope, a new future, a new possibility. Because of that hope, any menace in the years ahead “finds and shall find [us] unafraid.”