

August 23, 2020 – Matthew 16:13-20

Nancy Wake was a very special woman. Living in Paris as the wife of a wealthy shipping magnate, she lived a life of luxury and opulence. And then WWII happened. And soon German soldiers were occupying Paris. They killed her husband, but she was OK. A pretty, young woman of petite stature and high class, they had nothing to fear from her.

What those Nazi forces didn't realize was that, from the moment the Germans invaded, Nancy Wake had turned into a soldier. That she was hiding stranded Allied soldiers and smuggling them back to Great Britain. That she herself secretly escaped to England, joined the British Special Ops and received eight months of combat training.

That she returned to France by covertly parachuting in behind enemy lines. That she began training hundreds of French maquis guerrilla fighters. That she personally led this team of maquis in mission after mission. That she operated heavy machine guns on a regular basis and that she once killed an armed soldier with her bare hands, using only a karate chop to the neck.

No, the Germans were oblivious to Nancy Wake. All they knew was that a female soldier they had nicknamed "the white mouse" was terrorizing their troops. And that this unknown woman had a bounty worth a small fortune put on her head.

They never knew who Nancy Wake really was. And she worked hard to keep it that way. Because protecting her identity meant protecting her life. And the lives of hundreds of other people under her command. And the only people she could entrust with the knowledge of her power and mission were her closest friends and most trusted allies.

But that's understandable. Nancy was a spy and a soldier. Why is it, though, that Jesus chooses to operate under this same premise? Because, for most of His ministry, Jesus works surprisingly hard to protect His real identity.

We see it in His miracles. When He turns water into wine and then offers it to the master of ceremonies so discretely that the other man doesn't even realize that anything unusual has happened. When He heals the blind man and orders him not to tell anyone about who healed him.

We see it in His teaching. Parables that told the wonders of God's plan of salvation, with more wisdom and understanding than any human could possibly attain. Parables that often went completely over His audience's heads. And yet, for the most part, He doesn't explain them. He doesn't offer how He knows these things. He drops these nuggets of God's truth in their laps and then walks away, like He's done nothing at all.

We see it when He argues with the Pharisees. When they ask Him, point blank, "Who are you? Why should we listen to you?" And instead of proclaiming His divinity, He dodges the question. Answers their question by asking another question.

We see it in the very way He approaches His ministry. There is not recorded anywhere in the New Testament, in any Gospel, a single instance of Jesus introducing himself. Of even telling the people His own name. Let alone His true identity.

For most of the people He taught and healed, He was simply "the Nazarene," or "the Galilean," or "the Teacher," or most commonly "the Son of Man." Which meant little more than saying, "Hey, I'm just some guy. I'm just one of you. I'm completely ordinary."

If He had been a spy, it would have been a perfectly executed cover. And yet, Jesus wasn't a spy. In fact, if anything, we often look at the ministry of Jesus and see a bold attempt to reveal God to the people. That's what miracles are for, right? For saying, "Hey! I'm the Son of God! Listen to me! Put your faith in me!"

And they are. At least, they are for us. But we're not just one of the people, looking at Jesus as one of many religious leaders to come and go without doing or saying much of anything important. We are Jesus' disciples. We are Peter. We proclaim, "*You are the Christ. The Son of the living God.*"

And we understand the implications of this proclamation. We understand that saying Jesus is the Christ means that His is the anointed one who fulfills all the prophecies of the Old Testament. All God's promises of a Messiah who saves his people from their sins.

We understand that saying Jesus is the Son of God means that he is fully God and fully man. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, but born of the virgin Mary. Of one substance with the Father, and yet obedient to the Father's will.

We understand that saying Jesus is the Son of the living God means he is the one and only God. He is the God who is in a world of false gods who are not. The God who lives and reigns and whom death cannot hold. Even when he is nailed to a cross and buried in a tomb.

We understand all this because we have had this revealed to us. Not by flesh and blood, but by our Father in heaven. We have had this revealed to us for one simple reason: We are friends of Jesus. We are each one of His trusted allies.

Like Nancy Wake during WWII, we are among those few people who truly know the extent of Jesus' power and mission. Jesus may not have been a spy. He may not have been special ops. But He did have enemies. He does have enemies.

Just like there were people in His day who wanted nothing more than to silence His message and twist His words, there are still those today who are enemies of Jesus Christ. They're all around us. They're called the world. And just like us, they were born enemies of God and hostile to His kingdom. And sometimes, we are just like them. Because we still sin.

Look at Peter. We read in this Gospel lesson Jesus pouring out praise upon Peter for making this confession of faith. But if we kept reading just a few verses further, we'd find Jesus rebuking him in the harshest possible terms. *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."* On the things of this world.

You see, Peter was a sinner. And when Jesus explained to the disciples the plan of salvation that God had in mind – the plan that Jesus should be arrested, crucified, die, and rise again on the third day – Peter didn't react like a friend of Jesus. He didn't react like a trusted ally. He didn't react with complete faith in God's plan.

No, he reacted like an enemy of God's will. Like a sinful human. He reacted like one of us probably would. *"Never Lord! This will never happen to you!"* Wrong answer, Peter.

But fortunately for him, friendship with Jesus is not something that is earned. Fortunately for us, friendship with Jesus is not something that is earned. It's something that is given.

We are friends of Jesus Christ not because we've earned or deserve that friendship from Him, but because in His grace and mercy, He has chosen to consider us His friends. He has chosen to consider us His trusted allies. His disciples. He has chosen to make us the rocks upon which His church is built. He has chosen to reveal something to us that is greater than flesh and blood could ever discover on our own.

Peter may have been shifting sand, but Peter's confession of faith is the bedrock of the Church. It is the key to the kingdom of heaven. The key to binding Satan and loosing his prisoners. It is the key to this great war between heaven and earth that we fight daily. And it is a key that can only be given by Holy Spirit.

We are not spies like Nancy Wake. But we are soldiers. Soldiers under the cross. Soldiers united by our confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And yet, we are not soldiers seeking to destroy the world. No, we are seeking to save it. Seeking by God's grace and power to bring more friends, allies, disciples into the kingdom of God. So that, like us, they too may be loosed from their bondage to sin and know the God who saves. Amen.