

Dirk Turns Back: Dirk Willems, 1569

Background: In 1569 Dirk Willems turned back. Jan Luyken's [*Yon Lau-ken*] engraving from *Martyrs Mirror* catches and freezes the moment of his turning.

Requirements: Two (or four) persons. Two additional persons can pantomime Dirk saving the guard.

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Reader 1: Dirk Willems was a young man who lived in the Netherlands, in the town of Asperen. As a teenager he met some Anabaptists. Their vision of Christian discipleship gripped Dirk's imagination, and he was baptized in the neighboring city of Rotterdam.

Reader 2: According to legal documents, after returning to his home town "in his house he held secret meetings and taught prohibited doctrines." That is, Dirk took part in an illegal house church where he and others taught a way of being Christian that was unacceptable to the Roman Catholic Church, the official church of the region.

Reader 1: Dirk was arrested and imprisoned. But he managed to escape from the prison.

(Optional pantomime begins.) He climbed out a window and clambered down a rope made of knotted cloths. Because it was early spring, the pond was still frozen. He ran for his life, pursued closely by a prison guard. Dirk made it across the cracking ice, but the guard broke through. The guard cried out in terror, "Save me!"

Reader 2: Hearing the guard's desperate plea, Dirk turned back. He reached across the ice and rescued his pursuer. The guard, dripping wet and freezing cold, promptly arrested Dirk. *(Optional pantomime ends.)*

Officials saw to his re-imprisonment in a more secure prison, the tower of the Asperen parish church.

Reader 1: This time there was no escape. Dirk was tried for heresy and condemned to be burned to death. As he was being burned, the wind blew the fire away from his upper body so he died in excruciating pain. People in the neighboring town heard him cry out as he died. Seventy times they heard him cry, "O Lord, my God."

Reader 2: Dirk's execution was to be a deterrent—to serve as "an example to others." Luyken's engraving of the decisive moment in Dirk's story, the moment of his turning back to save his enemy, has appeared in more than 250 publications. Dirk's executioners meant his death to be an example to others. But in a way unimagined by his enemies, Dirk's life and his death have truly served as an "example to others."

Reader 1: Dirk's story poses the questions of costly enemy-love. Why did Dirk turn back? Was it right for him to turn back? Would I have turned back?

Source: T.J. Van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenceless Christians* (Haarlem, 1685; ET Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1960), 741-742 (the Jan Luyken engraving of Dirk's turning is on p 741 check).