

Sermon: "Under His Wings"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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GOOD NEWS WITH A SHARP EDGE

I think we conveniently "forget" sometimes that the good news preached by Jesus was good news with a sharp edge. Jesus was not reluctant to talk about the cost of discipleship. He often said that entrance into the kingdom of God was through the "narrow gate." (Luke 13:24)

In other words, he taught that true religion consisted not only of saying the right thing but also of doing the right thing. True faith is always an act of courage, a striving to do the right thing when many others around us are doing the wrong thing, sometimes in the name of religion.

The faith of Jesus is not religion for the fainthearted. A cross still stands at the center of that faith, and many want to avoid the implications of what we believe. In a world that is often hostile to what we believe, some might want to say, "Just be quiet about what you believe. Make religion a purely private and personal matter. Public pronouncements can get you into trouble. If you fight for justice and righteousness, you may find yourself out on a very precarious limb."

But, Jesus was not reluctant to publicly confront the injustices of his world. The gospels clearly teach that Jesus did fight for justice and righteousness at every opportunity. His entire ministry was about lifting up those who were oppressed, and bringing healing and hope to those whom society had rejected as unimportant. In this regard, Jesus' ministry was very much like that of the Old Testament prophets. They too brought a word of judgment to a society that had become corrupt and self-centered.

And so, like the prophets of old, Jesus found himself on a very precarious limb as he made his way toward Jerusalem. The champion of the underdog can quickly become a target of those in power.

SAFETY FIRST

According to our Scripture, even the Pharisees came to Jesus and warned him that trouble was coming. "Herod wants to kill you," they said. You know you're in trouble when even your enemies are concerned for your safety!

But, were these Pharisees really so concerned for the safety of Jesus? I'm not so sure. Yes, Herod was "off his rocker." This crazy king had killed John the Baptist and would not hesitate to have a troublesome prophet like Jesus killed.

But, I think the Pharisees were not really concerned about Jesus' welfare. They wanted Jesus to be scared off by the storm clouds that loomed. They wanted him to do the normal thing, the reasonable thing and turn back from his self-destructive path.

Jesus did not respond as the Pharisees expected. Instead of running away from trouble, Jesus seems to make things worse. He said of Herod, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My goal.' [33] Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem." Luke 13:32-33 (NASB)

How could Jesus find the courage to say such provocative things? For us the word fox suggests someone who is sly or shifty. But, in Jesus' day calling someone a "fox" was an extreme insult. Calling someone a fox meant that this person was "worthless." In modern parlance we might say something like, "That miserable insect Herod, who cares what he thinks?"

I'm sure some of the Pharisees might well have told Jesus, "Well, you should care what Herod thinks Jesus. He's in charge. Haven't you heard that 'might makes right?'"

Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He knew that Jerusalem was the place where true prophets were abused and killed. But, he would not be scared off by threats. He would go to Jerusalem and do what he needed to do and say what he needed to say. Jesus would be faithful to his heavenly Father's kingdom even though it would eventually cost him his life.

I think that Jesus is an example for us at this point. God has not called us to be successful, always giving the people a word they want to hear and running at the first sign of trouble. Instead, God has called us to be faithful. God has called us to go boldly into the lion's den and speak the truth. God has called us to proclaim his word where they "eat prophets for lunch."

THE THIRD DAY

Why on earth would Jesus want to go to Jerusalem, and why on earth would we want to follow him to that dreadful place? It is because Jesus had a hope that transcended the threats of a king and the hand wringing of overly cautious religious leaders. Jesus believed that there was more to this situation than met the eye. Jesus believed that somehow, some way he would come out the other side of murderous Jerusalem with a victory.

Jesus would not change course for a "fox" like Herod or for any other power for that matter. Jesus would continue to drive out demons today and heal people tomorrow in the name of his heavenly Father for Jesus believed that, come what may, there would always be a "third day." There would be a time when He would be vindicated and the forces of evil would be decisively defeated.

I believe that this is the hope to which we are called as well. We are called to do what we can this day for the kingdom of God. It may seem like evil is getting the upper hand. It may seem like Herod's threats are stronger than anything we can do.

But, we too are called to "carry on" in the name of Jesus. We too are called to speak truth to power. We too are called to bring healing and hope to those that the world has forgotten. We too are called to do God's will in the face of threats and fears because we too believe in the "third day" of victory. We believe in that day when the forces of evil and death will finally be defeated.

One of the central beliefs of the Christian Church is this doctrine of the "third day," or the doctrine of the resurrection. Indeed, I believe with the apostle Paul that if there is no resurrection, there is no Christian faith. As the apostle put it in his letter to the Corinthians, "...and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. [18] Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished."

1 Corinthians 15:17-18 (NASB)

But, the doctrine of the resurrection is not just something to be believed. It is something to be lived. The resurrection is a "goal" for us just as it was for Jesus. (See Luke 13:32) Now what does that mean? How can the resurrection be a goal for our lives?

Well, let me tell you first what this resurrection hope doesn't mean. It doesn't mean an empty wish about the future, a kind of dream about "pie in the sky by and by." It's not a fearful desire for

deliverance from our mortality. The old gospel song expresses that fearful (and unbiblical) desire well, "If heaven's not my home, then Lord what will I do."

Lord, what will I do? Do you hear the fear in that statement? If we are consumed with obtaining the "safety" of heaven after our mortal life, then we do not know the power of the resurrection. If we are preoccupied with making judgments about "who is going to heaven and who is going to hell," we know nothing about resurrection power or the heart of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of the resurrection is a hope that begins here and now and goes forever. It is not a consideration that is postponed until we are on our deathbed, and we think that there is no other way out. It is a hope that changes our way of life in the present. It is grace and forgiveness so deep that it changes the way we look at the world.

We are not overcome by fear of what a powerful crazy person like Herod (or Sadaam or Bin Laden) might do.

Instead, we are filled with hope that the power of God's Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead might also protect us and raise us out of our sinful and self-centered ways. We keep on keeping on with the business of God's kingdom because we believe in the promise of the "third day."

GRACIOUS JUDGMENT

Jesus judged the rulers and religious leaders of his day. But, there was grace behind that judgment. Like the prophets who came before him, the Son of God came not to destroy people but to warn them.

In the Old Testament we see that over and over God stayed his judgment on Israel in hopes that she might repent and turn back to God. But, they were blind to the grace of God's judgment. They could hear only the judgment, and they rejected the true prophets of God.

And so it was in Jesus' day as well.

Jesus described the blindness of his people to God's gracious judgment when he said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!" Luke 13:34 (NASB)

The heart of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is a heart of compassion. What a wonderful word picture is drawn by the passage, the mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. In nature we learn how maternal instincts cause even the most ferocious of animals to be gentle with their young.

This beautiful, gentle maternal instinct describes the heart of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. God longs to take us under Her wing and care for us gently. Only our lack of repentance keeps us from that receiving that gentle care.

REMEMBER THE DUCK

Richard Hoefler tells the story of a little boy who was visiting his grandparents and was given his first slingshot. He practiced in the woods but could never hit his target.

However, when he came back to grandma's backyard, he spied her pet duck. On impulse he took aim and let fly. The stone hit, and the duck fell dead. The boy panicked. Desperately he hid

the dead duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister Sally watching. She had seen it all, but she said nothing, at least at that moment.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But, Sally said, "Johnny told me that he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you Johnny?" And she whispered to him, "Remember the duck." So Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. But, Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." Again she whispered, "Remember the duck." Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing.

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's chores, he couldn't stand it any longer. He confessed to grandma that he killed the duck.

She gave him a hug and said, "I know Johnny. I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgive you. But, I was wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you!"

THE FREEDOM OF REPENTANCE

In a greater way, Jesus longs to forgive us, to free us from a sinful past, and to take us under his sheltering wing. But, often we needlessly enslave ourselves. The opportunistic "Sallys" of the world use our guilt as a way to keep us in bondage. "Remember the duck," they tell us. Be afraid of those who can judge and harm you.

But, the Bible tells us that the perfect love of God in Christ casts out fear because in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. And, more than that, this perfect love of God in Christ compels us to forgive and love others. (See 1 John 4:18-21)

It is through repentance and forgiveness that healing occurs. It is through repentance and forgiveness that we learn to listen for Jesus' voice of compassion instead of Herod's voice of fear.

Tony Campolo in a sermon addressed to the students of Eastern College after the 911 attacks wrote,

"I worry about attitudes of vengeance. Vengeance is a very destructive mindset and I hear the word vengeance over and over again. 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord, 'I will repay.' And we dare not usurp the prerogatives of God at a time like this...."

I thought of all the senators who spoke [that] Senator McClusky from Maryland said the best thing. In that great prayer meeting they held under the Capitol dome she said, 'I pray dear God, that you will bring those who perpetuated this evil,' and I was waiting for her to say 'to justice' and she said 'to repentance.'

And that's our hope people. If we keep on returning evil for evil, violence for violence, we'll get nowhere. It's only when in fact we and they come to repentance and we change our ways that a new day will dawn."

It's been almost three years since Tony preached that sermon, but the message is as relevant today as it was then. The Savior still weeps over the destruction of Jerusalem and New York and Baghdad.

As Jesus was wounded on the cross in Jerusalem, so the heart of God is wounded again when innocent people are blown up, land is seized illegally and politicians act more like Herod than servants of the people. God weeps when he sees children who are abused, families that are broken and lives that are ruined by greedy lies.

But, I refuse to give in to the despair that seems to have infected so many. I refuse to believe that this “crazy” world is what some have called the “new normal.” I refuse to give in to the fear of Herod.

Why? Because I still believe that the “third day” is coming. I still believe that as we travel down the road to Jerusalem, we will learn about more than just suffering and despair. We will learn how a compassionate God can turn even the worst suffering into a symbol of hope and salvation. We will learn about how God in Christ can bring salvation from a cross.

THE DESOLATE TEMPLE

There is judgment in the message of Jesus. Many times in his ministry he warned the people that their “temple” was in danger of destruction. The temple authorities didn’t want any talk like that. They wanted to protect the temple and Israel’s faith, and they thought that the way to do that was to cooperate with those who had political power, people like Pilate and Herod.

But, in the end their policies did indeed lead to the temple’s destruction.

Not all voices of judgment bring chaos. Some bring renewal and hope. So it was with the voice of Jesus.

But, they wouldn’t listen to Jesus. And so Jesus made a declaration that sounds very much like something Jeremiah or Ezekiel might have said. Jesus said that when their city and their temple do not have God’s presence, it is already destroyed. Their house is left “desolate.”

UNDER HIS WINGS

Have you ever loved someone that you could not protect because they were their own worst enemy? If you have, you know how Jesus felt as he wept over Jerusalem. He did all that he could do. He just opened his arms and wept for his people.

That’s a very vulnerable position you know. Sometimes when you seek to take that self-destructive loved one under your wing, it is you who ends up getting hurt the most. But what else can you do when you love someone?

So it was with Jesus. Like a mother hen he wanted to spread his wings and welcome his little ones to a place of safety.

What a strange image for Jesus to choose. He’s not the lion of Judah who roars and proclaims his strength. He’s the lowly mother hen seeking to protect her chicks.

But, isn’t that just like Jesus? His kingdom is certainly not of this world.

In Jesus’ world kings and scholars end up on the bottom while children and peasants end up on the top. In Jesus’ world the first become last and visa versa.

While the foxes of this world lick their lips, Jesus spreads his motherly wings over his brood. I’ve seen enough Discovery Channel to know that the chickens never win this battle.

But, don't judge too quickly.

Jesus stands between the helpless ones and those who would destroy them. Jesus, like a good mother hen, gives his life so that his little ones might escape. He spreads his wings on a cross.

At the time it seems like there is no one left for him to shelter. But, as we go on down the road to Jerusalem, we will see that the story is not as bleak as it first seems. Jesus is concerned about more than just a single city. He has compassion for a whole world, and the brood that gathers under his outstretched hands on the cross will become greater than any could have ever imagined.

What about you? Is your house desolate? Are you burdened down with a load of guilt? Are you afraid of what the future might bring? Do you feel like a helpless chick with the foxes of this world closing in fast?

The way to safety is not to make a pact with the fox! Sooner or later the fox will do what is natural.

Instead, the way to safety is to heed the warning of our Savior. Don't succumb to your fears or the ways of the world. Repent and go in a different direction. The road leads to Jerusalem, and the security you seek is found in the most unlikely of places, under the wings of Jesus as he is crucified on a cross.

God in Christ still weeps on your behalf. God in Christ still longs to take you under His wings.

Remember that the heart of God is the forgiveness and compassion of Christ. In him we are forgiven and freed. In him we have hope for life eternal.

Amen.