

Luke 13:31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” 32 He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ 34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

LOVE REJECTED

Did you ever have a friend or family member who was about to get in trouble? You knew that things were going to go terribly wrong. You tried to tell them.

But, they wouldn't listen. They got angry. They pushed you away. Maybe they even ran away. And sure enough it happened just like you said it would. And all you could do was mourn a tragedy that could have been prevented.

That's what today's lesson is all about. It is the tragedy of love scorned. It is the tragedy of warnings ignored. Many of you know what it is like to have your protective love scorned. And so you can begin to understand in a small way how Jesus felt when he reached out to embrace his people and the world with God's love and was rejected. It was tragic.

The gospel of John puts it this way, “.. though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but they did not receive him.” (John 1:10 NIV)

In one of the liturgies that I use for the Lord's Supper there's a phrase about Jesus Christ that goes, “He was murdered by people he loved.” God sent his Son into the world to redeem the world, and what did the world do? They killed him. They crucified him.

And, since the Bible also says that it was for our sins that he died (1 Corinthians 15:3), you could also say that we killed him. We crucified him. The cross stands at the center of the Christian faith. It is the symbol ultimate rejection. It is the symbol of our rejection.

It is not only the symbol of what “they did back then.”
It is the symbol of what we do here and now.

RUN JESUS RUN!

Our lesson for today begins with a warning from the religious leaders, the Pharisees. They tell Jesus, “You better watch out. King Herod knows about you, and he wants to kill you.” Were the

Pharisees really concerned about the safety of Jesus? I doubt it. They didn't like what Jesus had to say, and they were trying to control him with a frightening message, "Run away Jesus. King Herod is after you."

Now the Herod in our passage for today was the second generation of the Herods. Herod's dad was as paranoid a person as you would ever meet. You'll remember that when the wise men told him that a king had been born in Bethlehem, he said, "Not on my watch. Let's kill all the children that might make that claim."

That first Herod was crazy and mean. That's a really bad combination. And you know what they say about the son, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

So, if the message of the Pharisees was true, Jesus had ample reason to be afraid. Perhaps it would be best to lay low and stay away from Jerusalem until crazy Herod finds something or someone else to worry about.

The Pharisees still come to us even today, and they tell us to run away from the things that would destroy us. (The Pharisees now have their own TV show on Fox News and CNN!)

They remind us that the world is filled with danger. Just a bit of ice or a few cells dividing the wrong way can cause us to lose everything.

We have become so accustomed to the daily litany of what might destroy us that we don't notice that this fear of what might happen has made our life less than it should be. The stories of loss keep us from moving on. We limit what we do. We spend so much time guarding our health, our possessions and our safety that we forget to live.

But, today we learn that the seemingly safe and prudent path is not always the best one. Sometimes it is the temptation of the devil.

CONFRONTING HEROD

Jesus did not succumb to the temptation of the Pharisees to run away and play it safe. Instead, Jesus directly challenges the legitimacy of the powers that be.

I think we sometimes conveniently forget that the good news preached by Jesus was good news with a sharp edge. Jesus never hesitated to confront injustice with God's truth.

Instead of running away at the first sign of danger Jesus led the fight for justice and righteousness at every turn. He lifted up the cause of those who were oppressed and brought healing to those whom society had rejected as unimportant.

Once again Jesus did not run away when confronted by the threat of an unjust ruler. Jesus tells the Pharisees,

“I’ve got a message for Herod. You can quote me on this. Tell that fox that I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to be right here today, tomorrow and the next day. I’ll be spending my time casting out demons and healing people of dread diseases. If he wants to stop me from doing that, he is welcome to try.”

Sometimes it seems like Jesus is intent on waving a red flag in front of a bull. When he called Herod a fox that was an big insult. Foxes were the petty thieves of the animal world; they were a pest akin to a rat.

But, foxes are also clever and dangerous ... especially to the little chicks of the world, Herod had already proved to be a deadly fox. He got rid of John the Baptist when he dared to cross him. Surely he wouldn’t bat an eye at killing Jesus too.

But, Jesus is not impressed. Herod might rant and rave and threaten, but to Jesus Herod is nothing more than a common pest. For Jesus the real threat is in the temptation to be diverted from his true mission.

That mission is to preach the good news. The kingdom of God is at hand. And this kingdom will bring salvation to all people. Herod ruled the people with deception, cruelty and exploitation,. King Jesus will rule by the power of God’s truth and self-sacrifice.

Jesus has a new vision to proclaim. Instead of dividing people with fear, the people will be united with hope. When the kingdom comes people will come from all over the world to Jerusalem. They will come from east and west ... north and south ... to eat at God’s table of grace.

It is a kingdom in which the world’s values will be turned upside down. Some who are first will be last and some who are last will be first. In God’s kingdom those whom society has written off are also included. The widows, debtors, sinners tax collectors and little children are elevated, and the big shots like Herod are in for a big fall. (Luke 13:29-30)

Of course the big shots don’t like that. But, Jesus is not modifying his mission to please the big shots. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where the prophets were stoned. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for a showdown with the powers of evil. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to be crucified by the same people he came to save.

I think that Jesus is an example for us. God has not necessarily called us to be successful, always giving the people a word that they want to hear while 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 in that place where they “eat prophets for lunch.” God has called us to take up our cross and follow him.

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 proclaimed a hope that transcended the threats of kings 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 Jerusalem would not be his last stop. Jesus believed that the story would continue no matter what his enemies did.

Jesus refers to this hope when he says in our passage for today, “... on the third day I finish my work.” Does that sound familiar to you? It should. As we say in the Creed, on the “third day he rose again from the dead.”

Jesus would not change course for a fox like Herod. Jesus would continue his mission. He would drive out demons today and heal people tomorrow because Jesus believed there would always be a “third day.” There would be a resurrection. There would be a time when his ministry would be vindicated, and the forces of evil would be decisively defeated.

We too are called to live in the hope of that third day, the hope of the resurrection. It is just the second Sunday in Lent but already we can faintly see the glow of resurrection.

Like Jesus we are called to do each day what God calls us to do. It may seem like evil is getting the upper hand. We may feel threatened by the actions of those in power.

But, we cannot be diverted from following Jesus. We too are called to carry on in his name. We are called to speak truth to power. We too are called to bring healing and hope to those that the world has forgotten.

We are called to be courageous because we too believe in the third day of victory. We believe that when all is said and done the forces of evil and death will be finally defeated. And that is why we do not give up on anyone ... even those who reject us and bitterly disappoint us.

We believe in the power of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. We believe in the power of that third day.

THE PAIN OF REJECTION

But, of course that doesn’t mean that the rejection of the ones we love is easy. It wasn’t easy for Jesus, and it won’t be easy for us either.

In Luke's gospel Jesus has not yet made it to Jerusalem, but he is already anticipating the conflict. He has not yet made it to Jerusalem, but he can already feel the pain of rejection.

One thing is clear. Jesus has a deep and abiding love for his people. He loves those who follow him. He loves those who do not understand him. And he even loves those who seek to destroy him.

In this passage his love is symbolized by the hen who gathers her chicks under her wing when danger approaches. Like a good mother, Jesus is willing to die for his children ... all his children.

But, his children do not appreciate him. His children feel smothered by his wings. His children prefer to follow the fox who leads them to destruction.

This is not what Jesus wants, but this is what Jesus gets. He sees it coming. And with arms outstretched he weeps for the children who will reject him. He cries for Jerusalem.

In the NRSV translation Jesus says, "See your house is left to you." Actually that's too weak a translation. It should be something like, "You've chosen this path of destruction and now your house is left destitute of God's help."

God won't force salvation upon us. If we are "hell bent" on destruction He will let us go. But, he will cry for us and lament what could have been.

This image of the mother hen desperately wanting to protect her chicks is yet another image of the love of God. It's much like the picture of God that we see in the story of the prodigal Son.

We are unfaithful, but God remains faithful. And when we reject him he mourns. And with tears in his eyes and arms outstretched he waits for us to return. He is always ready to welcome us home.

A NEW PORTRAIT OF GOD

This is the portrait of God that is painted by Jesus. God is not a remote, prime mover who created everything and then left it to run on its own.

The God revealed in Jesus is passionate. The God revealed in Jesus is emotional. The God revealed in Jesus weeps for his children who have run from His protective wings.

At first blush this seems like a strange image for Jesus to choose. He's not the lion of Judah who roars and proclaims his strength. He's not the king of the jungle. He's the lowly mother hen seeking to protect her chicks.

And yet, when you think about it isn't that just like Jesus?

He told us this strange truth often. His kingdom is not of this world. In Jesus' world kings end up on the bottom while children and peasants end up on top. In Jesus' world the first become last and visa versa. In Jesus' world (unlike ours) sometimes the hen defeats the fox.

What do you do when someone you love and wish to protect runs away? All you can do is weep, open your arms up wide and hope that they will come back.

That's a very vulnerable position. Sometimes when you take self-destructive loved ones 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. And that is still his desire.

A NEW PORTRAIT OF THE HOLY CITY

There's a place in Jerusalem that recalls our passage for today. It's the newest church in Jerusalem built on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem.

It's a small place, more of a shrine really and the name of the church is Dominus Flavit which means in Latin, "The Lord Wept." (Those of you who have internet access might want to Google "Dominus Flavit" when you get home, and you will be treated to some wonderful pictures of this church.)

Anyway, the sanctuary is in the shape of a teardrop, and a prominent window behind the altar looks out over the city of Jerusalem. Iron grillwork divides the view into sections. On a sunny day it looks like a stained glass window except in this case the subject is alive.

The Holy City appears in the lower half of the window while two thirds of the view is the sky above the city. It is almost as if the artist wanted to portray the heavenly Jerusalem hovering over the earthly one.

The altar sits in front of this window and on that altar is a picture what never happened in that city. It is a mosaic of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb looks like a crown, and her wings are spread to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet.

But, the inscription around the medallion reminds us that this never happened. It reads in Latin, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing."

That last phrase, “and you were not willing” is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks’ feet.

I find this church to be a good symbol of what is going on in the world today. The world is still filled with Herods, sly foxes who threaten to destroy. Chicks still are not willing to seek the protection and care of the Savior. Blood still flows in the Holy City.

But, Jesus wants to give us a new vision. He wants us to look at the Old Jerusalem through the lens of the kingdom that comes. He wants us to see the New Jerusalem that descends from heaven as a bride. And he bids us think about this passage in a personal way.

Long ago they were not willing to seek the protection and salvation that was offered by God’s Savior. But, what about us? Are we willing?

Do we run away from God? Are we afraid of what the future might bring? Are we overwhelmed with guilt? Do we feel like a helpless chick and the foxes of this world are closing in on us fast?

Don’t run away. Don’t make a pact with the fox.

Repent and go in a different direction. Travel with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

God in Christ still comes to us. And we are invited to hear in a fresh way the promise of God. We are invited to move beyond our fears and our guilt to experience the mercy of God.

The words spoken by Jesus as he thought of Jerusalem are also words for you and me.

Jesus said,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I longed for you. How often I have desired to gather you to myself.”

God longs for us. God desires to gather us under his wings. God seeks us. God calls us home.

In Jerusalem Jesus stretches out his “wings” on a cross and the tables are turned forever. On the cross we see the heart of God. It is the heart of compassion and forgiveness.

Join us as we once again make that poignant journey back to Jerusalem. Join us as we return to the heart of our faith.

Amen.