

## 2 Lent (C)

Lk 13.31-35

Do you remember the story we heard from Luke's gospel a few weeks ago in which Jesus goes to his hometown of Nazareth, and while he's there he goes to the synagogue and preaches a sermon on a passage from the book of Isaiah? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." In that story, we see Jesus offering comfort to the afflicted.

Today, we see Jesus doing something rather different; today's he's not comforting the afflicted, he's afflicting the comfortable. "Go and tell Herod, 'I am not afraid of you.' Go and say to Jerusalem, that great and mighty city, 'You may have power, you may have authority, but I am not afraid of you because your desire for security and control is not as strong as my desire to save'."

This is a strange text. This story shows up in only two of the four gospels, in Matthew and in Luke. In Matthew, this story happens *after* Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, not long before he's arrested. But in Luke, the version we heard this morning, the story takes place long *before* Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. In fact, we don't quite know where he is at this point: we know he's on his way to Jerusalem, but at this point the gospel writer tells us only that "Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way" to the holy city; he could still be in Galilee, he could be somewhere in the region near Samaria, but wherever he is he is on his way to Jerusalem.

So part of what Luke seems to be telling us is that Jesus hasn't even *reached* Jerusalem and already those in power perceive him as a threat to the established order. Word has reached Herod of this charismatic rabbi going through one town after another on his way to the capital,

and Herod thinks, “That sounds like trouble. That sounds like an insurrection headed my way.” So he sends Jesus a little message: the word on the street is that if Jesus shows up in Jerusalem with an army at his back, Herod will take him down.

But Jesus is having none of it. And the thing we especially need to recognize here is that he absolutely refuses to play the same game Herod is playing. Jesus refuses to turn this into some kind of competition between himself and Herod. What he *doesn't* say is, “Go and tell Herod, ‘I’m not afraid of you because I’m stronger than you’.” What he *does* say is, “Go and tell Herod, go and say to Jerusalem, ‘Something is happening that you don’t understand, but whether you like it or not it’s going to happen’.”

Some of what Jesus has to say here sounds a little confusing, but that’s because he’s using language that is steeped in first-century Palestinian Judaism, and so far as I’m aware none of us speak that language. Even the figures of speech are not familiar to us. “Today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way.” “It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” “Your house is left to 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’.” That all sounds a little strange to twenty-first century Western ears.

So we have to do some unpacking. The most important part here, the part that makes sense of all the other parts, is that last bit: “You will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’.”

Part of what Jesus is saying here is that Herod and those in power in Jerusalem have misunderstood him; they have not yet grasped his identity or his intent. They are determined to perceive him as a threat, but that’s not actually what he intends to be, not primarily. The only reason he appears to be a threat is because they refuse to see him for who he is.

One thing he does here is to remind them they've had this problem before. He calls to mind the prophets and reminds Jerusalem that they seem to have a consistent problem when it comes to prophets: they never seem to be able to recognize prophets in time. After the fact, prophets are easy to recognize; hindsight's always 20/20, right? After the fact, the memory and the message of the prophet is held in high honor, but not when the prophet is alive and active. When they're alive, it's nothing but trouble. "You kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you," says Jesus, "and now here you are again, about to do the same thing all over again." It's almost as if their resistance to his message is itself a kind of evidence of the truth of his message.

So Jesus puts himself squarely within the long line of those chosen by God and sent to Israel to call God's people back to being who they are called to be. But then he raises the stakes a bit: he says two other things that suggest he's more than just another prophet.

The most obvious thing he says is, "You will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'." That kind of language is not only prophet language, that's messiah language. Yes, prophets carry out their ministry in the name of the Lord, and yes, prophets are blessed by God. But Jesus applies this language to himself in a way no mere prophet would have dared to do. He is the one through whom God's redemption is being revealed in the world.

The other thing Jesus says that raises the stakes is this: "Your house is left to you." Matthew's version is even more forceful: "Your house is left to you, desolate." With that one phrase, Matthew and Luke evoke a whole host of images from the history of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, we find that same kind of language being used to remind Israel what invariably happens to them when they're not faithful to God's covenant.

In the First Book of Kings, God reminds Solomon of the importance of being faithful to

the covenant. “I will consecrate the house you have built, and if you walk with me your house will be established forever. But if you turn aside to serve other gods, then the house I have consecrated will become a heap of ruins, and Israel will become a proverb and a taunt among the nations.” In the book of Jeremiah, God says to Israel, “If you obey my words, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who will sit on the throne of David. But if you do not obey my words, then this house will become a desolation and I myself will turn you into a desert.”

Jesus calls to mind all that imagery, both the promise of God’s faithfulness and the warning about the consequences of unfaithfulness, and applies it to his own ministry. Not seeing Jesus for who he is, refusing to recognize the work he is doing, is no different from being unfaithful to God’s covenant promise. Because Herod and those in power in Jerusalem are determined to see him as a threat, the best they can expect is judgment and desolation.

That’s pretty strong language, and you don’t use that kind of language when addressing kings and rulers and authority figures unless you’re pretty clear yourself on who God has called you to be and what God has asked you to do. In today’s gospel, Jesus speaks with the assurance of someone who knows *exactly* who he is and *exactly* what God has called him to do.

Sometimes Jesus comforted the afflicted. Sometimes he afflicted the comfortable. Sometimes he did both at the same time. God’s plan of salvation will always be good news to those who are willing to receive it, but it will be bad news to those who are not.

There’s one final thing here worth noticing that’s easy to overlook. Jesus says, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... 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 sounds like a word of judgment, but the problem Jesus identifies here may not be what you think.

Right before this story happens in Luke’s gospel, someone asks Jesus, “Lord, will only a

few be saved?" In response, Jesus says, "Many will try but will not be able. People will come from east and west, from north and south and will eat in the kingdom of God, but many of those who claim Abraham and Isaac and Jacob as their ancestors will be thrown out. Some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last."

That is definitely judgment language, and the particular problem Jesus identifies has to do with Israel's failure to be a light to the nations, to be a testimony to those in the east and those in the west, to those in the north and those in the south. So when Jesus says "How often have I desired to gather your children together," he's talking as much about God's desire to gather the Gentiles as he is about God's determination to redeem Israel. Those who knew the prophets, those who had the law, they were charged with being a light to the nations.

In other words, this story is about mission as much as it is about anything. And now we have been given that same work to do: we have been joined to their covenant, we too are called to be a light to the nations.

Following Jesus today is about advancing God's mission to bring deliverance and healing and hope to the world and to gather together all the peoples of the earth. It's about our calling to share in that work and to be a blessing to the world by helping others recognize the good news that Jesus brings and to help them learn what it means to say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The season of Lent is a time for us to ask ourselves whether or not we are as committed to that mission as Jesus is.

And the thing we're tempted to do is to pit ourselves against the powers of this world and go toe-to-toe with them. We want to tell the Herds of this world, "We're not afraid of you because we're stronger than you. We're going to beat you at your own game."

But following Jesus means we have to pursue a different path; we have to adopt the

strategy that Jesus himself adopted, one that is grounded first and foremost in the proclamation in word and in deed of God's redemptive mercy and love for all people. This in no way means we won't at times have to speak hard words to those in power; we will often have to speak hard words to those in power. But our words must be directed towards helping them recognize the truth and the grace that is only to be found in the one who comes in the Name of the Lord, the one who cannot be threatened or intimidated because he knows himself to be God's beloved son, God's anointed messiah.

May we find ourselves in him and in so doing know ourselves to be his beloved children, that we might likewise be anointed with the power of his Spirit to do his work in the world to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

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