

Politics As Usual

Luke 13:22, 31-35

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” 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. 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.’ 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! 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.’”

We’ve read a lot of our Sunday Scriptures out of Luke recently. The lectionary – the 3-year cycle of Scripture readings – focuses primarily on one gospel a year. John is sprinkled throughout. But starting in December, with the beginning of Advent, we’ve been in a Luke year. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we haven’t been reading Luke in order. We’ve sort of been bouncing around, which can make it a little tricky to figure out exactly what happened when. So let’s try to sort out where we’ve been.

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The reason we need to get our heads around this is because our reading this morning is really difficult. It’s going to help us if we can put it in context. Last week we talked about the temptation, which was at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. But today we’ve jumped way ahead, and Jesus is in the thick of his ministry. He’s thinking and talking about the end of his ministry in Jerusalem. Prior to this confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus has been doing a lot with the crowd. He has been teaching in parables, and he has been healing. Then he finds himself confronted by the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were one of several Jewish groups at the time of Jesus. They were known for following both the written laws of Moses and the unwritten oral traditions. So the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees was largely theological. Jesus gave no attention to the oral

traditions, and he often reinterpreted the written laws. Just before our confrontation this morning, Jesus had been healing on the Sabbath.

So the Pharisees were trying to get Jesus under control. They do this by trying to take away his followers. They figured if they asked Jesus really tough questions – even impossible trick questions – his answers would make him look silly. Then no one would follow him around anymore. And their problem is dealt with. Jesus is no longer a political or theological danger. The problem, of course, is that Jesus was so full of God’s wisdom that he couldn’t be trapped by their questions.

In our story this morning, the Pharisees come to Jesus in a new way. Instead of badgering him or trying to trap him, they offer him helpful advice. “Herod is really mad, and he’s planning to kill you. You need to run away now.” What would you think if your greatest antagonist was suddenly appearing to save your life? This is out of character for the Pharisees. Something here just doesn’t seem right.

Is it possible the Pharisees are trying to help him? Sure. The Pharisees are not fond of Herod as their ruler, so this could be a case of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” But Jesus doesn’t seem to think this is the case. He accuses the Pharisees of being in cahoots with Herod. Because just like the Pharisees, Herod also wants to get Jesus under control.

Now, Herod couldn’t care less about Jesus’ theology. Herod was himself Jewish, and he ruled the region by permission of the Roman authorities. It was the Romans who kept him in a position of privilege and prestige. So Herod’s real loyalty wasn’t so much to the Jewish people as it was to the Romans. That’s why so many Jewish people didn’t like Herod. And it’s also the reason Herod had a problem with Jesus. Herod was allowed to rule as long as things stayed peaceful. But with Jesus talking about a kingdom, and with his followers believing he was about

to overthrow the Roman government, Herod was not facing peace. He was worried that a full-blown revolution was about to break out. So Herod also wants to get Jesus under control.

In fact, Herod's father – Herod the Great – wanted to get Jesus under control from the very beginning. Remember the story of Jesus' birth? The Herod in that story is the father of the Herod in our story this morning. He learns about Jesus, the king of the Jews, from the visiting wise men. When they fail to tell him where Jesus is, Herod plans to kill all boys under two years old. How does Jesus survive the massacre? God appears to Joseph in a dream, telling him to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt.

Actually, when you stop to consider it, our story this morning really mirrors that story from the Nativity. In both stories, one of the Herods wants to kill Jesus. And in both stories someone warns Jesus to flee. Jesus responds to this warning by following God. This looks different in these stories. In the birth story, God issues the warning. So by fleeing, Joseph is obeying God's instructions. In our story this morning, the warning comes not from God, but from the Pharisees. And Jesus knows that in order to obey God, he has to ignore the Pharisees.

This is actually the key to understanding this complex story this morning. In short, this is a story about following God's plan. Jesus senses that the Pharisees, in one way or another, are up to no good. So Jesus tells 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. 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.'" According to several Jewish writings, many prophets were killed in Jerusalem. With these two dense, enigmatic sentences, Jesus is declaring that he knows he will be killed, but that it won't happen here. It will happen later, in Jerusalem. So Jesus ignores the warning from the Pharisees and tells them, "I know you're working with Herod. Go back to him

and tell him he has no power over me.” Jesus isn’t worried about Herod, because he knows God’s plan is for him to die in Jerusalem. And Jesus also knows that no one, not even Herod, can interfere with God’s plan.

Because God’s plan isn’t just for Jesus to die. Jesus had to die at the right time, in the right place, in the right way. So what is it that makes the crucifixion right? There are lots of different ways to try to make sense out of Jesus’ death on the cross. But there are two key components that are relevant this morning. First, we need to recognize the timing. If Herod had killed Jesus as an infant, we would have missed out on everything he had to teach. We wouldn’t have heard his parables about the kingdom of God, we wouldn’t have seen him model Christian community by eating with tax collectors and prostitutes. It was important for Jesus to have time to share his message.

Okay, that makes sense. But why would God’s plan be for Jesus to be executed as a political prisoner? By going through with this part of God’s plan, Jesus showed ultimate devotion and obedience to God. Let’s face it; Jesus could have run away from Jerusalem at any point in his ministry. He never does enter either Sepphoris or Tiberias, two other large cities that were strongly associated with Herod. Jesus could have run away when the Pharisees warned him. He could have run away when he prays in the garden of Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.”

But remember the next words in Jesus; prayer? “Yet, not my will but yours be done.” Much has been written about the idea of free will. God created people to have free will. We can choose our own actions, but that means we can also choose to walk away from God. Jesus uses his free will to be obedient to God. He doesn’t have to be obedient; he chooses to. If we think back to the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve use their free will to be disobedient. And us? We’re

more like Adam and Eve than we'd like to admit. Each of us has had moments of being obedient, but we've also had times of disobedience. With his life, and with his death, Jesus shows us how to choose obedience, how to choose God, even in the face of great threat.

God requires nothing less than full obedience from us. Jesus was able to live up to that expectation because he was fully divine. Jesus was the son of God. But Jesus was also fully human. He was tempted, just as we are. He knows how hard it is to live up to the expectation of full obedience. Jesus offers us forgiveness and salvation because he now sits at the right hand of God, and he can advocate on our behalf.

Even though God gave each of us free will, and thus the choice to disobey and walk away from God, God hopes we will make a different choice. God wants us to follow him, but he wants us to do so willingly. God doesn't want to force us. He wants us to choose to be in relationship with him. And if we make that choice, Jesus is able to bridge the gap between God and our imperfection and disobedience. And that's good news. It's good news for anyone who's ever strayed from God's plan. It's The Good News. Amen and amen.