

“Forty Days with Jesus”

Luke 13:31-35

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

March 17, 2019

I was crossing Massachusetts Avenue outside Union Station when a man approaching from the other side of the street announced: “Christ is risen!” His appearance was similar to the classic image of an ancient disciple. His words were unmistakable, and carefully chosen. The volume of his voice was low-key, normal. The statement was clearly directed at me, as no one else was nearby.

I was on my way up to Capitol Hill. The stranger was walking from that direction. I was a bit startled, and I did not respond---I seldom do in such encounters. But whatever the stranger’s motives, he is correct. Each in our own way, we both believe: “Christ is risen!” I am just not one to typically announce it during public travels!

We are in the midst of forty days dedicated to reconsidering what that means: “Forty Days with Jesus”. But let us not sell ourselves short. A stranger in downtown Washington DC reminds us that, thanks to God, we spend every day with Jesus, and he with us, whether we acknowledge it or not, at any given time.

As the Lenten season begins, we are reminded that Jesus found himself in a wilderness of uncertainty, tempted to lose trust in God and to turn back from his mission. Yet Jesus ultimately prevailed. Today’s text, in the Gospel of Luke, tells of an encounter with the Pharisees, in which Jesus reaffirmed that mission.

Let’s set the stage, providing some context:

Contrary to our typical concept of the Pharisees, here they are not so bad. We have been conditioned to view the Pharisees only in an aggressively hostile role vis-à-vis Jesus. But here they seem to be his concerned friends, so this passage in Luke gives us a different perspective.

In a book entitled “Who Is Jesus?”, John Dominic Crossan writes: *“It is not as if the early Christians sat down and said, ‘Let us invent lies about our enemies’. Christians were originally one Jewish group among many other Jewish groups in the first century. We should hear the word ‘Christians’ the way we hear words like ‘Pharisees,’ ‘Sadducees,’ ‘Essenes,’ ‘Zealots,’ or any other group within Judaism at that time. They may all have been struggling for power and control, for the hearts and minds, the destiny and leadership of their own people.”*

The Pharisees, who were scholar-teachers scattered among towns throughout Judea and Galilee, were probably the leading party. Their authority was grounded in the Oral Law handed down since the time of Moses. They maintained strict religious practices that they expected others to follow, and they also advocated for Jewish political freedom. Jesus’s teachings were more closely aligned to the Pharisees than to any other religious party. Even the Apostle Paul was trained as a Pharisee.

We’re still setting the stage, providing context:

Luke, the author/physician, synchronizes his Gospel with the Herodian dynasty. In Chapter One, King Herod’s rule marks the days when Elizabeth and Zechariah learn that John the Baptist will be born to them. The beginning of Jesus’s healing and preaching takes place in the shadow of another Herod. That Herod imprisons and executes John, and grows increasingly concerned that Jesus’s activities threaten his corrupt political control. By Chapter 23, Luke describes how Herod and Pilate mercilessly throw Jesus’s destiny back and forth between them.

So again, in today’s text, the well-meaning Pharisees are cautioning Jesus to abandon his mission in Jerusalem by fleeing from Herod, who has already beheaded John the Baptist: *“You must get*

out of here, and go somewhere else, because Herod wants to kill you.” (Luke 13:31). Jesus indicates his contempt for Herod, who was promoted from nowhere, only by the nepotism of his father, to keep order in the far flung territories: “Go and tell that fox, ‘ I am driving out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I shall finish my work. Yet I must be on my way today, tomorrow, and the next day; it is not right for a prophet to be killed anywhere except in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God has sent you!”

There is so much code language in this response of Jesus as reported by Luke!

- 1) Herod is a “fox”. Code: The Jews regarded the fox as the slyest, most destructive of animals. The fox was the symbol of a worthless, insignificant man. (A mangy, menacing fox has periodically roamed our Olney neighborhood, from a den cleverly concealed along our backyard fence line.) In the ancient world, it took a brave person to call the reigning king a “fox”.
- 2) The “third day”. Code: Note the biblical parallels. In Chapter 2 of Luke, the boy Jesus is found on the third day in the Temple. In Chapter 24 of Luke, the risen Jesus is alive again on the third day. Remember, Luke’s Gospel story is told from the author’s post-Easter perspective.
- 3) “Jerusalem...you kill the prophets!” Code: Jerusalem, though historically and religiously the Holy City, had played a central role in the persecution and deaths of God’s messengers.

In code language, Jesus is reaffirming that he takes his orders from God alone, and that thus he would not shorten his work by even one day to please, or to escape the wrath of, any earthly king. What matters is that Jesus has a destiny to fulfill, namely to go to Jerusalem and die, risking the threats of the fox, but rather adopting the role of the mother hen to her chickens

faced with sudden danger. (That mangy, menacing fox hangs around our neighborhood, we are convinced, because a family on the other side of the fence keeps chickens).

So, go and tell that fox...I shall finish my work!

Jesus's intention, in obedience to God, is to go to Jerusalem and, like a hen with her chickens, to take upon himself the full force of danger. The One will give himself up for the many.

This Lenten period of self-examination, forty days with Jesus in the wilderness, affords an opportunity to reflect on what may tempt us to flee from the cross, and to flee from embracing the mission of Christ. To what cunning foxes are we listening? How often do we follow that which is not life-giving—the foxes, the false prophets, the crafty, the seemingly powerful—rather than following that which may seem weak or “chicken” but ultimately gives life?

Not only does Jesus keep seeking us out, to gather us in, but he is at work in the world and calling us to do likewise. Who are the vulnerable around us? The weak, the infirmed, the economically challenged, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the depressed?

Muslims, in vulnerable mosques.

Jews, in vulnerable synagogues.

Fellow Christians, in vulnerable pews.

Children, separated from their parents at border crossings.

Victims of wasteful wars, tortured in solitary confinement.

People of color, mocked and maimed by adherents of white supremacy.

How can we, empowered by the Holy Spirit, face the foxes of this world to protect the brood? Not only does Jesus keep seeking us out, to gather us in, but he is at work in the world, and calling us to do likewise. The One gives himself up for the many.

Whatever that stranger's motives were, outside Union Station, he was correct: "Christ is risen!" His announcement was clearly directed at me, as no one else was nearby.

So...I must go, and finish the work.