

Sunday March 17th, 2019

Lent II

PRAYER: O Lord, send your word into our midst. Let us, like Abram, receive it honestly, despite our fear, and respond to it faithfully, despite our trembling. Assure the peoples of your presence, and we will enlist our passion in your service; assure creation of your care, and will commit our courage to your cause.

Send your word into our lives, O God. Let it dwell in our flesh, and we, like the disciples, will receive it honestly, despite our fear, and respond to it faithfully, despite our trembling. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: We find our comfort in Acts 13:38-39 were we find these words, “Let us, therefore, rest our minds and our hearts in the forgiveness that is ours through Jesus Christ.” Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: King Solomon gives us this important command when he writes in Proverbs 3:9, “Honour the Lord with your wealth as the first charge on all your earnings.” Let us therefore honour the Lord now with the giving of our tithes and offerings.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Gracious God, your word tells us that when we are weak then we are strong. The implication being that when we are at our most vulnerable, you are fully present in your love and strength poured out upon us. We are also told by your servant Paul that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. So, why O God do we feel so helpless; so overwhelmed by life? How we long to know that these promises of strength and possibility are more than mere cliché. That when we quote them to ourselves or to others, there is power in these words. Like the desperate father at the base of the mount of Transfiguration, we cry out to you “we believe, but please help our unbelief”.

We readily admit, Lord, that we hear your truth but we fear it. We fear how your truth will change our lives. We want to believe that that change will be good, but we are doubtful. Our anxiety gets the better of us when we are being called to new directions and new ventures in your Kingdom. We fear most of all giving up our sense of control, as misguided as it is. How many opportunities have we passed on to see your Spirit at work among us, because we were afraid, or stubborn? How much heart ache have we caused ourselves and others because we thought we knew better?

No wonder we hide our struggles from each other. We fear we will look weak. We fear becoming a burden. We fear that others will not understand, and in turn we fear you will not understand. It is ironic that we feel we have to have it all together in the very fellowship where being broken is the situation, we all face. The triumphant church comes through Christ, not through us.

When I am weak then I am strong. That is true for each one of us and together as the body of Christ. Remind us regularly, O loving God, that coming to you together, as we are, is the whole point. We come, not because we are strong, but because we seek strength in the company of your people. We come, not to seek the status quo, but to see the new thing you are doing in our midst. We come not because we know the truth but rather because we want to encounter the truth in Jesus.

Help us come to peace with the reality that just as Jesus had a destiny in going to the cross, we too have a destiny. Step by step, you light the path we are to follow. A path we walk together so that if one of us should stumble, our companions are there to help us back up.

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Even today, O God, we know that all of us carry our own struggles, our own challenges. Some are greater than others. Some are easier to solve than others. Some are transient and others are life altering. Speak a word of peace into each of our hearts today. May your love thaw our isolation? May your hope bring light into our darkness? Heal we pray, and bodies assailed by health challenges. Quiet the tempest in any restless spirits. Restore cohesiveness to any fractured relationships. Comfort those whose losses threaten to break over them and swamp them with despair.

Help us to be a people quick with a word of prayer for another, a comforting embrace to ease loneliness, and a listening ear as another pours out their soul. Help us in our care of each other to leave each other knowing fully that you were with us today, and today is the Day of the Lord.

BENEDICTION: O God, unless you are the stronghold of our life, our worship is in vain. So lay your hand upon our hands and your spirit upon our spirits; let your vision be our vision, and your work, our work. Amen.

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Luke 13:31-35

“Foxes in the Henhouse”

It had been a hard morning, navigation through thick, slow traffic, and Jimmy was tired, and very hungry. He knew his trucking route quite well, and soon came across one of his favourite truck stops. Parking his rig, and then washing up, Jimmy sat on a counter stool, his mouth already watering as he ordered his favourite and actually mine as well, comfort food. A hot beef sandwich with mashed potatoes and gravy on the side, and a steaming cup of coffee.

No sooner had Jimmy's plate of food arrived, when a large contingent of a motorcycle gang roared into the restaurant parking lot, angle parking their bike all in a line. The riders barged into the restaurant, startling clients and staff alike. They soon began demanding service and intimidating patrons. All the while, Jimmy sat enjoying his meal. Jimmy's lack of response was noticed by the gang's leader, who rushed over and began to tease and try to intimidate Jimmy.

Jimmy simply ignored him, which just enraged the biker. The biker up the ante, but pouring Jimmy's coffee on Jimmy's lap, but Jimmy ignored him. Then the biker took the mashed potatoes from Jimmy's plate, and smeared them on Jimmy's head. Again, no response. Then the biker took the gravy pitcher, and poured the gravy all over Jimmy as the bikers all howled at their leader's antics. Jimmy said nothing.

His meal now ruined, Jimmy simply wiped off as much of the mess as he could, calmly walked to the register, paid his bill, and went out the door. The biker leader, turned to the waitress and said, “He sure isn't much of a man, is he?” To which the waitress said, “He isn't much of a truck driver either, as he just rolled his rig over all your motorcycles.”

I think I am safe in saying that most of us are acquainted with intimidation. Perhaps it is bred into us as a survival tactic. We have all seen animals try to use intimidation to discourage predators. Some animals puff themselves up, or make their fur bristle. A skunk, turns his business end toward the threat trying to scare it off, except my dog on the farm who seemed to not care if it got sprayed. I once saw a field mouse, when we lived on the farm, try to intimidate one of the barn cats, by standing on its hind legs, claws out, and seeking to look ferocious.

Humans have taken this strategy to new heights. We still use physical intimidation, including weaponry, but we also use psychological intimidation; like blackmail, to coerce others into to doing our bidding. In many work places, there is an individual, or maybe a couple of individuals, who have made intimidation into an art form. They may be the boss, but not always. These individuals make everyone around them walk on egg shells, fearful of retaliation, or that the bully will make a scene, or manipulate the truth.

Which brings us to today's gospel lesson. It seems like an odd little passage and to be honest, I don't think I have ever used it as a text for a sermon before. And like all texts of scripture, context is important, but in this passage, it is critical to our understanding and application. It is in essence a passage about intimidation, or at least a concerted effort to use intimidation to manipulate Jesus and make him go away. Which begs the question; why did they want him to go away? Perhaps, it was because of something he said or did.

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In verse 22 we read that Jesus had been traveling through towns and villages, teaching about the Kingdom of God as he made his way to Jerusalem. He had shared parables about the nature of the Kingdom of God, healed several people, and had garnered a considerable following. Then, and this is important, just before this passage we read today, Jesus delivers his famous line about the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

And so, what does verse 31 say? “At that very hour, some Pharisees came to him”. It is safe to say that Luke wants us to see what transpires next as a direct response to the phrase “the last shall be first and the first shall be last”. The Pharisees caught Jesus’ intention with this phrase. As prominent religious leaders, they probably saw themselves, at least on some level, as the “firsts”. As “firsts” they had not let Jesus’ words penetrate their hearts, while the “lasts” (the poor, the hungry, the sinners etc.) flocked to him.

Put another way; in the Kingdom of God, the outs were in, and the ins were out. So, it is obvious that when someone threatens your status, you are prone to develop dark thoughts, and seek a way to get rid of the threat. None of their strategies seemed to keep Jesus from continuing his teaching, and ministry; as he makes his way to Jerusalem. So, they try a different track. They tell Jesus that Herod wants to kill him and he should run away. Classic intimidation.

Now this is where the passage gets tricky. Herod Antipas was the Roman approved ruler of this geographical area in today’s passage. When Herod’s father, Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided into four regions, one of which Herod Antipas was given to rule. Pilate ruled another. The question now arises in this passage about how legitimate was the threat of Herod to Jesus. Do we take the words of the Pharisee’s at face value?

Yes, Jesus had developed a following, but so did other religious leaders. How much sway did the Pharisees actually have with Herod? Most of what we know about Herod, pictures him as more secular than religious. Yes, he did have John the Baptist beheaded, but that was not for religious reasons, but because he foolishly made a vow to Salome who danced provocatively before him. A decision, by the way, he is pictured as having regretted.

And if Herod wanted Jesus dead, why then when the Passion narrative begins, and Pilate sends Jesus to him, does he pass on making a judgment and sends him back to Pilate. Yes, Herod was not someone to trifle with, but I really wonder how serious a threat he was to Jesus. As Jesus moves closer to Jerusalem, he becomes Pilate’s problem, and that sets the scene for Jesus’ trial. Jesus seems unfazed by this threat. In fact, he calls the threat an empty one.

Jesus knows where his destiny lays, and Herod has no part in it. Herod knew who Jesus was, and knew what he was doing and saying; but frankly I am not really convinced he cared. I think the Pharisees invoke the threat from Herod, as a way to intimidate Jesus, and to push him away from the area. We know from the scriptures that Jesus faced death threats several times. Herod the Great tried to kill him when he was a baby. In Luke four his own home village tries to throw him off a cliff. However, Jesus never falters.

Jesus knew his destiny, and he knew that no one, or nothing, could deter him from that destiny. Not even a fox like Herod or a group of Pharisees.

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And that destiny lay in Jerusalem. A city that had failed to be what God intended it to be. Jerusalem was to be a beacon; an example for other nations to emulate. But that is not what happened. Ruled first by judges, Jerusalem begged God for a king. As time went on the kings moved further and further away from God. To address this drift, God sent prophets to remind the people how they should live.

Instead the rulers loved their power and wealth. To avoid dealing with the inequality in their society, the kings decided to get rid of the one making waves; the prophets. Isaiah came and prophesied, and was sawn in half for his trouble. Ezekiel as well was martyred; as were Micah and Amos. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”*

Jesus’ point here is that Jerusalem had a choice. Instead of killing off the prophets to try and avoid God’s word, they could have listened. Instead of fearing the loss of power and influence, they could have given some consideration to how to live godly lives and transform the city. Jesus wanted the heart of Jerusalem transformed, but the people, especially people in power, were unwilling.

All of us know from experience how incredibly frustrating it can be to know what is the best or right thing to do in a situation, and no one is listening or cares what we think. So, why do people ignore good advice? Psychology Today in its March 28, 2013 online posting gave three reasons people ignore good advice derived from experiments. The first is maybe what Jesus was encountering in our passage today.

In the article, it is called “The Power Problem”. Researches discovered that when people feel powerful, even temporarily, they are severely less inclined to use advice, no matter how good it is. The reason maybe is because we like to make a good impression on people, by showing we are competent and knowledgeable. Taking advice, makes us feel we are not as powerful as we thought we were. That’s maybe why men refuse to stop and ask for directions.

Another reason we are apt to dismiss good advice has to do with the ups and downs of our moods. In an experiment, people who were shown a movie clip to make them angry, were three time less likely to accept advice, than those who saw a clip that made they experience gratitude. When we are in a state of gratitude, we are more likely to see the one giving advice as a helpful friend rather than a suspicious foe.

The third way researches say our willingness to accept advice is affected, has to do with what they call the “anxiety paradox”. Not all negative emotions drive us to avoid advice. Anxiety can actually make us more willing to seek and listen to advice. Anxiety lowers our confidence, and we are prone to discount our own judgment. However, we need to be careful here. Anxiety also makes us more susceptible to bad advice or manipulating advice.

It is one of the tools scam artists use to get people to give away personal information. They present a situation that makes us anxious, like we owe money to Revenue Canada or our credit card has been compromised. Then they ask for personal info to solve the problem.

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It is clear that the Pharisees were seeking to use the anxiety trigger to manipulate Jesus. It is also interesting that throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks to all three of these hurdles to accepting his advice and help. I should also mention that there is also an inherit temptation by the advice giver to say to the one who did not heed the advice, "I told you so".

It is also quite odd, at least to me, that the Pharisees continually seek to get rid of Jesus. It seems incredulous, or hard to swallow, that someone who could heal and deliver people from demons would not be wanted. Could it be that change, even if it is a good change, is rarely wanted by a community. For example: all of us would probably agree that programs that address poverty and addiction are valuable things. We might be quick to say, "bring it on".

That is until the shelter, the methadone clinic, or the safe injection site, is going to be put right next door to where we live or where we have our business. The greatest challenge to resourcing those who live on the fringes is NIMBYism, or not in my back yard. We fear what we do not know. Remember Psychology Today said anxiety is a problem when it comes to accepting sound advice. We can, when anxious, accept the hysteria of folks who picture the worst happening.

The Pharisees are wanting Jesus to go away, because they don't want him in their backyard. They do not want him to upset the applecart. They feel their power threatened, and they are anxious. What the Pharisees do not yet know, is that Jesus was destined to leave Herod's territory anyway. Although important in John the Baptist's story, Herod is really but a footnote in Jesus' story.

We are now into the second week of Lent, which is to be a purposeful spiritual journey of traveling with Jesus to the cross. We know his destiny, but do we know our own? Is it possible that Jesus still laments over his people? That he still longs to gather us like chicks under his loving wings. Perhaps we struggle because we have become intimidated. Intimidated by the world, by false voices, or our own inability to accept the good advice on God.

It is tragic when we do not hear the voice of God calling us to abundant living, because when people do listen, amazing things begin to occur and entire communities are transformed. J. Edwin Orr, one-time professor of missions and church history at Fuller Theological Seminary, became an expert in the study of the great Welsh revival of 1906. Rarely does a revival have an impact on a nation like the Welsh revival.

The lives of people were radically changed. Along the southern coast of Wales, stretching from Swansea to Cardiff, were several shipyards. For many years, the men who worked in those shipyards had pilfered tools-ranging from hammers to wheelbarrows. When the revival struck, these men felt that true repentance required that they return the tools they had stolen. Soon, so many tools were brought back to the shipyard that the tool shed were full to overflowing.

Dr. Orr reports that records show, that at some of the shipyards, signs appeared that read something like this: "If you have been converted because of the recent revival and are planning to return things that were stolen form the shipyard, please do not do so. Keep what you have stolen. We have no more room for stolen goods." (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p. 97)

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What would happen in Simcoe if a similar revival occurred? Would we embrace the change wrought in people's lives, or would we long for Jesus to move on to somewhere else? When we see good things being done in the name of God, do we celebrate and give thanks, or do we grumble and cast suspicion on those who sincerely seek to serve Christ? Maybe we don't see revivals anymore, because we think we know better what our town needs or worse we have allowed the foxes into the henhouse with nary a reaction.

I wonder if Jesus is saying today, "O Norfolk County, how I longed to gather you under my wings as a mother hen gathers her chicks."