

Lenten Journey II: Ministry in a Hostile World

A sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church

Second Sunday in Lent; February 28, 2010

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Psalm 27

Luke 13: 31-35

Last week we met Jesus in the wilderness facing the kinds of temptations we all face, trying to decide what to do with his life. I tried to make the case that all of us have either already been in his shoes or eventually will be there. The Jesus we meet in the wilderness of his life is very familiar and very human. We've been there too; hungry and thirsty for answers and assurance; faced with temptation. This is very different from the Jesus in the stained glass windows who is always serene and confident, full of faith and who has all the answers to life's impossible questions.

This week we meet him again in the midst of his ministry, and at first glance, the Jesus of the stained glass windows seems to be coming to the fore. He is now speaking of himself as a prophet; he is driving out demons and healing people. This is the person we are called to follow in our lives, and, ironically enough, it is because of Jesus' profound teachings and impressive healings and miracles that most people just throw in the towel and give up on Christianity. We just can't imagine how we could ever follow someone like that, someone who has it all together, who attracts great crowds of people because he can do miraculous things, someone who seems to float through life without worry, who can even face the threat of death with courage and great faith. In short, the gospels don't speak to us in the midst of our lives. What can we possibly do to reverse the great imbalance between the rich and the poor in the world? What can we do to reduce climate change?

Some might respond that our problem is that we just don't have enough faith. If we had Jesus' constant faith in his closeness to God then we could go forward and do great things like he did. Consider the faith of the Psalmist in today's reading when he sings: *God is my light and my salvation – whom then shall I fear? God is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked close in to devour me, it is they my enemies who will stumble and fall. If an army should encamp against me, my heart shall not be afraid. If war should arise against me, even then will I not be dismayed.*

Powerful words; words full of faith and hope. If God be with us who can stand against us? Perhaps this was the source of Jesus' courage when he was threatened by Herod in today's gospel reading. Jesus' ministry has hit some rough water. Some Pharisees have come to him to say that his life is danger: The king of the area wants to kill him. Herod has the power to do that too, without a trial and without any repercussions. Herod's death squads were everywhere. People regularly disappeared.

Jesus' response to this threat is the lesson for today. Listen to what he says: *“Go and tell that fox that I am not going to stop what I have been doing”*. “I will continue with my ministry of teaching and healing; I will keep going until I reach Jerusalem where I will die as all the other prophets have died.”

Wait a minute! The Psalmist promises that it is the foes of God who will stumble and fall. We are promised that God will protect God's people, especially so in Israel and Judea, the Promised Land. But history seems to have proven the Psalmist wrong. Since these words were written, traditionally by King David, empire after empire has invaded the Promised Land, killed or enslaved the people, carried them off into exile. And now in Jesus' day, it is the Roman's turn to defeat, occupy, dominate and kill. And Rome

does this by compromising the leaders of the people to support the tyranny of their occupation. In Jesus' day it was King Herod and the High Priests. Three hundred years later as the Empire was crumbling, the Emperor Constantine followed the same strategy, but this time it was the growing Christian church that he enticed into his camp. Christianity became the official religion of the same empire that had killed our Messiah three centuries before. The domination of Christianity would continue in Europe and America for the next sixteen hundred years as new empires were established theoretically to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, but actually to enrich the home countries and establish their supremacy across the world. It was only in the twentieth century that the leaders of the world discovered that a new secularism had become so powerful that they really didn't need the church anymore and we lost our power to influence the laws and actions of our governments. Now, suddenly the church is weak again, like it was in Bible times, losing members and influence and routinely ignored by the political leaders of our day. For the first time in almost 2000 years we can relate again to Jesus and his words against Herod: ***“Go and tell that fox that I am not going to stop what I have been doing”***. “I will continue with my ministry of teaching and healing; I will keep going until I reach Jerusalem where I will die as all the other prophets have died.”

And now we can see in Jesus' words the most human of responses when faced with threats from powerful; for it is here that we see in Jesus a sense of despair. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to together your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” Many in the church feel the same kind despair today: “What's the use? Our churches are failing; many of them are closing; the gospel is meaningless as governments stress economic issues, benefits for the rich and nothing for the poor, destruction of the ecosystems, and all the other problems of our day.” Does Jesus have anything to say to the church in our day. To put a finer point on it does Jesus have anything to say to Glebe Road Church as we prepare for our Annual Meeting in a few minutes. Yes, I think he does have something to say and he says it in today's scripture: ***“Go and tell that fox that I am not going to stop what I have been doing”***. “I will continue with my ministry of teaching and healing; I will keep going until I reach Jerusalem where I will die as all the other prophets have died.”

I think it is important to notice here that in the midst of conflict with powerful authority, Jesus recognizes that all he can do is control his own behaviour. He realizes the futility of trying to stop Herod from doing what he and the Roman forces will eventually do. And so he doesn't say something like, “Go and tell that fox that he must stop supporting the power of the Roman occupation and recognize his duty as the King of Israel to be faithful to the Lord our God”. He doesn't say, “Go and tell that fox to bring justice into the land that God gave to God's people”. He doesn't say, “Go and tell that fox to love kindness as God has commanded the leaders of the people to do from generation to generation.” And he doesn't say, “Go and tell that fox that he must walk humbly with our God as is his duty and God's anointed one in the land.” The powers of this world will not listen to Jesus, in the same way that they have never listened to the prophets, and in the same way the powers of our world will not have much time for us.

This is a lesson the church in our day often forgets. We demand that Israel get out of Gaza and the West Bank; we insist that the Canadian government respect its agreement to implement the Kyoto protocol and negotiate an even more stringent agreement in Copenhagen. Perhaps we remember the good old days back in the fifties and sixties when the church had some power in society, when the Moderator could boast that the Prime Minister would return his calls. Then, the churches would make its demands on the government of the day and even if they did not get their way they were at least they were listened to.

The days when the church had any clout are long gone. Now we are in the same position that Jesus was before Herod. Now we, like Jesus, have no power to influence anyone in authority. However, even without

any power over others we, like Jesus, are still able to decide what we will do with our lives. “Go tell that fox that we in the church will reach out to the poor and the despairing today and tomorrow and even on the third day if we survive that long. Go and tell that fox that we in the church will reduce our carbon footprint in our daily living and do our part to protect God’s Creation, even if we stand alone. Go and tell that fox that we will use whatever leverage we have to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God in our day. That is what Jesus said that he would do against the might of the Roman Empire and the traitors in his own society who served the empire. We can do likewise; we can be faithful. And we can be thankful that while the powers in our world may well ignore us, or cut our funding, they will not crucify us.

So let us take courage now as we come together to do our part to live into the gospel that we have been given. It is for us to love the world back into economic, ecological and ethical life. We follow the One who shows us the way.

Thanks be to God..

Amen