

“Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.” Luke 13:32 Roy A. Harrisville III

They weren't being helpful, you know. The Pharisees, I mean. They weren't being helpful. It's not as if they were concerned about Jesus' welfare. They couldn't have cared less. Jesus had insulted the Pharisees at a dinner party not long before this. He told them that they cleaned the outside of the cup but left the inside dirty. He meant that they made a show of being religious but their hearts were cold and dark. He told them how they loved to look important and powerful and score points in the synagogue with their learned comments and unctuous piety, but he said they were like unmarked graves over which people walked without knowing it. He told them that they had stolen the key of knowledge and wouldn't let others in. He meant that they had taken God's word and commandments and instead of teaching what liberty could be had through devotion to God, they had imprisoned their own souls and everyone else's with their little rules and regulations designed to keep themselves safe. They should have been leading people to God.

So, you see, when the Pharisees warned Jesus about Herod's malevolent intent toward him, they were probably doing so with a smirk on their faces. “Hey, Jesus, did you know Herod is after you? You better get out of town. We've got a taxi waiting for you and we'll even give you some travel money. You better go right now.” They didn't care about Jesus. They just wanted to get rid of him.

Jesus knew they were not there to warn him out of altruist concern for a fellow countryman. He knew they were there to try and get him to be afraid and skip town.

After all, Herod had already killed Jesus' cousin. Herod had killed John the Baptist. Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great and he was notorious for his adultery and his selfish ways. John the Baptist and Jesus both lived in his territory. He had divorced his first wife in order to marry his niece, who was the wife of his half-brother at the time. This is what John

the Baptist had so loudly criticized and for which Herod had put the Baptist in jail. When Jesus went to Jerusalem later on, he was tried before this Herod and mocked and beaten and sent off to Pontius Pilate for execution. Herod was an ambitious man whose fortune backfired on him and he lost his territory and was exiled by the emperor. Had he been given half the chance he would have killed Jesus without batting an eyelash.

Jesus knew all this. He knew what was in Herod's heart, the Pharisees' hearts, and he knows what is in all our hearts. He knows our thoughts and emotions before we think or feel them. He is with us when we shout from the rooftops or whisper behind closed doors. He is there in our dreams and sorrows and in our pain and joy. He is always there, or rather, in here. He knows the emptiness of our lives and he knows our happiness. Maybe that's what he was saying just before this episode of the Pharisees' warning. He had told his listeners that they should strive to enter by the narrow gate and that many would not be able to do so. He meant that one's heart and one's soul must be right with God and that such a thing is never easy or simple. Those who have the form of piety but not its substance will experience a deep shock when they are forced to stand outside in the cold. He meant that his followers should be genuine in their faith and life and not just pay lip service to God as though he were an efficiency expert we could fool with a few slick phrases.

That's when the Pharisees warned Jesus. That's when they warned him; right after he had said to strive to enter by the narrow gate. That gate was awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem and he was bound and determined to pass through even if it meant humiliation and death. So he told the little delegation of Pharisees that they could send a message back to Herod that it didn't matter to Jesus what some people wanted to do with him, he would do the work that he was called to do and nothing would prevent him from fulfilling that work. He called Herod a fox, and that was not a nice thing to do. It was rude in the extreme and even provocative and could have gotten Jesus into more trouble than he already was. This does not fit with the cute picture that many people

have of a meek and mild Jesus who wouldn't hurt a fly. Maybe not, but he insulted quite a few people, and some of them were VIPs. When we hear of Jesus healing people and casting out demons, like he says in this section, that comports just fine with our therapeutic vision of him. But when we see him cleanse the temple, call people names, reject people for unbelief, and so forth, it's not a picture that many embrace. But Jesus is in a monumental struggle with sin and evil and he cannot be deterred from his ministry. Even though people have the wrong idea about him and spread lies about him and even though some lay in wait for him to trip him up to have a pretext for condemning him, Jesus cannot afford to turn tail and run. He has a job to do.

It is not an easy one. It is a task that grieves him to his heart. He would rather gather his brood like a bird gathers her chicks under her wings for protection and safety. He would rather be gentle and soft and speak soothing words of mercy and hope. That is God's proper work. That is what God is about. He is not about judgment and death, but redemption and life. God is a God of reconciliation, not separation. When he calls to His people He does so in tones of pleading and earnest desire. For those of us who know the rest of the story of Jesus, his death and resurrection, we know what God is truly like. We know his purposes and reasons and his patient and gentle ways. But relationships are two-way streets. God had sent prophets and messengers and heralds time and again to his people and they would not listen. He had sent them Moses and Elijah and both of them were maligned and opposed. He had sent them Amos and Jeremiah who got kicked out of the temple and thrown down a dry well. Some of God's prophets were killed and others simply ignored and in the end the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were laid waste and desolate and the word of the Lord was silenced. No comfort or mercy was heard in those days because the people of God had finally achieved what they had wanted all along: an empty house devoid of God's presence, a temple without an altar, life without a heart.

No wonder Jesus lamented over that proud city of Jerusalem. No wonder he cried out in frustration as he made his way toward its gates. His heart sank within him to think that he had

come for their good but they had rejected him when all he wanted to do was to hold them in his arms.

So he made an ominous statement that is very troubling. He said they would be left to themselves. Their house would be left to them. They'd be on their own, after all that's what they wanted. So God would grant it. Instead of sending them messengers and prophets, he would send them absence and silence. He would send them nothing, for a time. If they wanted peace and quiet from hearing the Word of the Lord, so be it. They'd have it. God does this sometimes. He gives us what we want. He gives us back to ourselves to teach us how much we need him. He retreats from us, stands off a ways, and let's us deal with each other the way the devil wants. He takes his wings away and lets the cold rain fall and the hot sun burn on our backs. He withdraws his very presence as a last effort to get our attention. The Pharisees were convinced in their own minds that they knew who Jesus really was. They didn't. No one would know until the supreme sacrifice would be paid and the supreme triumph came on the cross. You know, I think God's absence from His people hurts him even more than getting spit on and insulted, mocked and beaten. I think it wounds the Spirit to have to put space between us. Without God's presence we get crabby and sullen and depressed. We lash out at each other and hurt each other. When we think ourselves supremely in control of our lives and our world, when we pride ourselves on our ability to manage our lives and our neighbor's lives too and are supremely confident in our own judgments, that is the moment when God releases his hand and lets us fall through his fingers and we fall from his warm embrace.

But even then, even then the Lord will not let us go. Even when we have treated him with utter contempt and pushed him away from us and even when he has stepped back to let us think we have achieved our goal, even then he is waiting and working to bring us back. Jesus said to the Pharisees that they should deliver a message to Herod. "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow and on the third day I finish my work." He would finish

his work come hell or high water. He would finish his work even if a thousand Herods were after him. He would not veer from the course that was set for him, not because he was stubborn, but because that work would result in the freedom of God's love and grace; because that work would finish in the very purpose for which God had sent all those prophets and messengers before. It would culminate in the final glory of God and the salvation of his people, his world, and his universe. It would finish in the very picture of a hen gathering her brood in her arms, the same brood that had refused so often before would willingly and with gratitude be covered with his wings.

Jesus is bound for Jerusalem and his path will not be altered. He knows what awaits him and he accepts his fate freely. He knows that only through struggle and death can new life emerge for his people. I had not wanted to preach on such a text today, but it is what God has put in front of us. It is not an uplifting message of pleasantries and soothing phrases, or is it? Is this precisely what we need to hear today? I wonder. Is this message of God's tenacity, his stubborn patience, his brave love, is not this the very message that we so need right now? Do we not need to hear that though we fall off the path from time to time and though we push God away from us and though he retreats for a while and though we may even find ourselves alone with our own sins, yet do we not need to hear that there will come a time when Jesus does enter our gates, that he is still on the way toward us and that he will not be driven off course? Don't we need to hear that as large as our problems may seem and as confident as we are of our own information and judgments, that Jesus is still coming to free us from ourselves and show us a still more excellent way. He will not delay. He is coming soon.

God is yet in this place and in this fellowship and nothing we do to each other or to him will put him off from entering our hearts. If we decide, in the Lord, to be bigger than the problem, if we are determined, in the Lord, to be greater than whatever crisis we face, then I am confident in the Lord that our path is set beyond Jerusalem, beyond fear and beyond death itself.

Our Lord is set to go to Jerusalem, we must be determined to follow him and take shelter under his wings. How often Jesus has desired to shelter us with his arms! He has done so on his cross. He has stretched his arms wide to embrace us and suffered all that we could throw at him and he has prevailed. So shall we. Let the foxes of this world be warned; let the Herods and Pharisees of this world take notice that our Lord has determined his road. He will never be moved from that path, but he shall move our hearts, he will move our souls and we will surmount any challenge, overcome any obstacle, and so fulfill the law of Christ until not only with our lips but with our very lives we declare, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” Amen.