

March 16th, 2025

Luke 13:31-55 “God Moves Past All Obstacles”

Welcome to our second Sunday of Lent where we are continuing our study of Luke’s gospel and his perspective on Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem. Our Lenten theme this year is, “God on the Move.” We want to discover how God can work in and among us in our Lenten journey in the same way that God worked in and through Jesus and the people he encountered on his final journey to Jerusalem. This week’s scripture seems to plop us down in the middle of something that we don’t have enough information to process. Verse 31 starts out, “At that very hour, some Pharisees came to him.” Okay, at *what* hour? Are we talking morning? Afternoon – maybe 3:00 tea-time? Evening, after supper? Nighttime? What hour are we talking about, and why does it matter? At this point, Jesus was still in Galilee. For quite a few chapters before our scripture, Jesus was healing and teaching about the Kingdom of God and using everyday illustrations to help people get their heads wrapped around what it’s like to live in God’s reign. We know it took place on the Sabbath. We know that Jesus had just directed some criticism toward what the gospel writer calls “the Pharisees.” Here’s where I need to hit the pause button and go over something that you’ve probably heard from me a few times, but it’s one of those things that bears repeating. When Jesus is critical of the Pharisees, some churches over the course of history have used this as an excuse to blame everything on the Jews. During the late 19th and early 20th century, many German church leaders and even theologians referred to the Jews as “Christ killers” and supported efforts to remove them from public life which eventually led to the Holocaust where close to six million Jews were exterminated.

I want to remind you that even though Jesus often called the Pharisees of his time things like, “a brood of vipers,” “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” and “whitewashed tombs,” the New Testament also mentions Jesus sitting at the table with Pharisees and having meaningful discussions with them. And there were Pharisees like Nicodemus, and Gamaliel who “got it” and followed Jesus. In our scripture this morning, a group of

Pharisees came to Jesus to warn him that King Herod was planning to kill him and that he should flee. We need to be careful when we use biblical texts to justify our hatred against *any* group of people whether it's based on religion or ethnicity. Jesus' critique of the Pharisees in his time and place had more to do with the mainstream religious establishment who had made a bargain with the Roman occupiers so they could stay in power and enjoy the perks Rome offered. That's what made Rome the most successful empire builders of their time. They curried favor with the religious rulers to reduce the possibility of potential uprisings. And most of the time, it worked. When it didn't – when the various territories Rome occupied rose up in protest, the Romans came down on them hard and fast. The lesson was -- If you follow Rome and proclaim Caesar as Lord, then you'll get the carrot. In fact, not only will you get the carrot, you'll get a basket of the finest fruits and vegetables in the Empire. Maybe even some fine wine and a Godiva chocolate too. But, if you rise up and rebel against Rome, you'll get the stick. And that stick has a hammer attached to it and will crush you without a moment's hesitation.

Now – let's get back to the scripture. This is an important turning point in Jesus' ministry. This is where Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem. He had spent much of his time preaching, teaching, and healing in Galilee while gathering more crowds and welcoming more disciples. In doing so, he became a huge threat to “the establishment.” And in the case of today's scripture, that meant he was the target of King Herod who loved the fruit basket and would do anything to avoid the hammer. For Herod, Jesus was a threat to the safety and power he had gained through his unwavering obedience to Rome. I'm not sure what *prompted* this group of Pharisees who tried to warn Jesus about Herod, but Jesus' response was, “Let him. Let him try.”

I finished an audio book last week called, *The Let Them Theory* by Mel Robbins. At first, I thought it was your garden variety self-help book, which I rarely read because there's only so many ways you can hear, “Cheer up little camper, believe in yourself, work harder and don't let

the world get you down” before you say, “I’ve heard it all.” Robbins piqued my curiosity though, because she addresses one of my biggest problems, which is caring too much about what people think of me. Robbins’ premise is that we need to learn how to say, “Let them,” when individuals or institutions try to manipulate us or even threaten us. I think that’s part of what was happening here with Jesus and these Pharisees. “Jesus, you better get out of here. Herod wants to kill you.” Jesus said, “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.’” Mel Robbins would say that was a “Let them” statement.

Let’s break this down. Jesus said, “Go tell that fox.” Some of you may remember that in the 60s and 70s being a “fox” was a good thing. Jimi Hendrix’s song “Foxy Lady” defined “foxy” as a “cute little heart breaker.” I say with utmost confidence that this is *not* what Jesus thought of King Herod. To get the more accurate definition of what it means to be a “fox,” we need to talk to someone who raises chickens. When my daughter-in-law Sam and I were setting up her temporary chicken coop in our back yard last year, she was showing me how important it was to make sure there was no way for vermin to get into the coop to take eggs or, worse yet, kill the hens. We were stringing up chicken wire and tying it down, and she’d inspect my work and say, “No, that needs to be closed up tighter.” Then she said, “Here’s how you know if you’ve done it right.” Then she’d morph into her animal form and say, “Gneh! Look at me! I’m a raccoon! I’m going to go steal some eggs” and she’d claw at the chicken wire to show me the potential point of entry.” Then she’d put her hand up by her mouth and say, “Grrr – Look at me! I’m a fox. I’ve come to eat your chickens!” which meant that I had to untie the chicken wire and start all over. As far as people who own chickens are concerned, foxes are not cute. Sure, if you’re watching a David Attenborough documentary on the Discovery Channel, foxes are beautiful. But if they’re after your chickens, they are vermin. That’s what Jesus meant when he called Herod a “fox.” He is craven and cowardly – a little vermin who eats helpless chickens. Go ahead. Let him come after me. I’m going to keep casting out demons, healing

people, and teaching today, and tomorrow – all the way up to the time I enter Jerusalem where my work will be finished on the third day (which was a nice foreshadowing to his resurrection.)

Why does he need to go to Jerusalem? Why does he have to confront this “fox” who seeks to kill him? Because, “A prophet cannot be killed outside of Jerusalem.” What this means is that the prophets who spoke out against the kings of Judah centuries ago were rejected and many of them were killed by the very people who the prophets were trying to protect. Jesus knows that if he goes to Jerusalem, this will be his fate too. He knows that even the citizens of Jerusalem will want him dead. After all, they enjoy that Roman fruit basket too. But does Jerusalem’s rejection of Jesus make him angry? Does it make him want to call down an army of angels to punish them for rejecting him? Remember last week’s lesson about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. The divine power that Jesus wields is not something to be used to grab earthly power, nor is it there to protect him from his enemies. He knows Jerusalem will reject him, but his response isn’t one of fury, it’s one of pity. “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!” What do foxes like to eat? Chickens. Helpless, vulnerable chickens. And yet, even though Jerusalem, the seat of power for the religious establishment, rejects Jesus, he still loves them and wants to gather them together for safety. Herod wants to kill me? Let him. He wants to be a roadblock to what I must accomplish for my work here to be complete? Let him.

There are two facts being held in tension here. Jesus loves Jerusalem and wants to gather, protect and cherish them. But this cherished city has historically responded to God’s love with rebellion, selfish ambition, and violence. Jesus loves Jerusalem but ultimately his love for her will be the death of him. In this way, Jerusalem is a stand-in for all of us here today. Jesus’ love for us is so strong that it leads to his death. Wow. That’s heavy pastor. Indeed it is. Which is the bigger obstacle? Herod’s

murderous plot to stop Jesus before he reaches Jerusalem? Or Jerusalem itself who will ultimately kill him upon his arrival? Who are the Christ-killers now, right? Jesus' answer to both obstacles is that nothing – not even his own death – can stop him from reaching the goal of loving his children. Jesus' love is opposed from the outside, and yet he continues to keep moving toward the object of his love. Jesus' love is rejected, but he still stays on the path to give that love away.

And here we are on this second Sunday of Lent. We've set a course for ourselves which will end in Jerusalem at the cross and the tomb. How's your resolve for this journey holding up so far? I think we need to ask if our course is set as resolutely as that of Jesus. Do we have a commitment to set our faces to Jerusalem, to the place where we meet God face-to-face and give our lives to God? Will we be stopped by the people who might not be pleased with the goal we've chosen? Will we be stopped by the obstacles outside of us or by the obstacles that rise up in our own hearts? From this time on, Jesus is on an unstoppable course toward Jerusalem, but that also means he's on an unstoppable course toward us, toward our hearts, with tenacity and determination that will not be blocked, not even by the obstacles we put in his place.