

Sunday, February 21, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 13:31-35

Not Safe

“Jesus, it’s not safe out there!” The people of Kalamazoo may say this. The people of Paris may say this. It was just three months ago that bomb attacks in Paris left 130 people dead. Most of the deaths occurred in a concert hall, where an American heavy metal rock band was holding a concert, brutally cut short. Just last Tuesday, the band met again in that hall, before fans, and finished the concert they had begun that terrible night. I don’t know this band, I don’t think I’d be into their music, their name is Eagles of Death Metal. I doubt they play church music, but I think their front man said something deeply theological about why they returned for the concert. He told French television “he felt a sacred duty to complete the set.”

“Jesus, it’s not safe out there!” That’s what the Pharisees say to Jesus, at the beginning of today’s gospel reading. In many gospel stories the Pharisees are Jesus’ adversaries: they don’t like what he is saying or doing, they even try to trap him. At first, in today’s reading, it may sound like that, too. It may sound harsh, and dismissive, when you hear the Pharisees say to Jesus, “Get away from here!” But here they’re not trying to trap him, but to help him get away. “Get away from here,” they say to Jesus, “It’s not safe. Herod, that terrible king, that brutal ruler who had your cousin beheaded, Herod is out to get you, too.”

Hearing this, though, it is Jesus who is dismissive. Jesus says, “Go and tell that fox,” referring to Herod, and not in a complimentary way, “Go and tell that fox that I have work to do, today, and tomorrow, and the day after that, too.” In fact, Jesus doesn’t just call it the day after tomorrow, he calls it, “the third day.” On the third day, Jesus says, he will finish his work, he will complete his set. Don’t tell him where he can’t go. He’s got work to do.

But before he goes on, before he continues his work, Jesus does pause. Jesus is not deterred by those who would try to protect him, but Jesus will pause, in lament. Jesus acknowledges the heaviness of his work, the death that is around him. Jesus laments over Jerusalem, and the people who live there. The people of the city are like little chicks, Jesus says, vulnerable, newly hatched. How he wishes he could gather those chicks, under his wings, like a hen gathers her brood.

I was thinking about the metaphor that Jesus uses here, of a hen and her brood. I was thinking of what this image says, and then I remembered that not too long ago, the Hanebergs kept chickens. In fact, it was around this time, two years ago, that a couple of their chickens were featured in a Lenten activity that the children of our church did. Every year in Lent, the Sunday School has a special project and focus, a way to think more deeply about people who are suffering and to raise money in support. Two years ago, the Sunday School children bought farm animals for people living in developing countries. One of their Lenten activities was an animal hunt, up and down the block they went, looking for farm animals. Yes, of course, we live in a city, it was a representative activity. The cow and the pig that they found weren’t real, but the chickens were. The Haneberg hens were the highlight of the animal walk. Well, the Hanebergs are also very active in Boy Scouts, which we celebrate today. I thought, maybe I could work a gospel connection there ...

It’s a stretch, I know. Even more than that, though, there’s the oddness of the metaphor. Not that I have something against chickens. Like our Sunday school children, I too am fond of

them. More than that, I treasure this scriptural metaphor for its a maternal aspect; I find its immensely meaningful that Jesus looks at the holy city and describes himself as a mother, a mother who is fiercely protective of her young, who would gather them together in the shelter of her wings...

But the chicks stray. The chicks are not willing. And then there's the oddness of this animal metaphor, in light of Herod's. Jesus compares himself to a hen, just after calling Herod a fox. We know what foxes do to hens. Jesus does, too. So what kind of a metaphor is this? What does it say about Christian life and safety? What does it say about what it means to follow Jesus, and about where he is headed?

The great preacher William Sloane Coffin gave a sermon ten days after his son's funeral. Yes, his son's funeral. His twenty-four-year-old son, who was killed in a car accident, driving in a storm. Ten days later, Pastor Coffin felt compelled to preach about what people had been saying to him. Some of the things people said were consoling. Some may have been meant to be consoling, but were not. You have probably also heard some things like that, some of the terrible things that people say when something terrible happens. Coffin preached against saying those things. Don't try to explain it away, he said, don't offer platitudes. Don't think they are comforting—even if they are scriptural. Coffin said that when people quote the Bible in that way, as a quick and easy solution, they are serving their own interests, rather than serving the one who is suffering. Coffin said that when that happened, it felt as if those people were “using comforting words of scripture for self-protection, to pretty up a situation whose bleakness they simply couldn't face.” But, Coffin preached, “Like God herself, Scripture is not around for anyone's protection, just for everyone's unending support.”

“That's what hundreds of you understood so beautifully.” Coffin preached, “You gave me what God gives all of us—minimum protection, maximum support. I swear to you,” Coffin said, “I wouldn't be standing here were I not upheld.”

That is what the people of God do, followers of Christ do, for one another, through Sunday School, and Bible Study groups, and Book Clubs, and choir, and Circles, and Teams, and Scouts. We hold one another up, for Christian life does mean the avoidance of pain and suffering, but a presence, and a strength amidst danger, the very strength and presence of God.

And so Jesus looks to Jerusalem. Jesus laments over a city full of danger and death, Jesus laments over our cities too. Jesus laments over children who have wandered, our children, too. Jesus laments over young people who die much too soon, and over old people, who have been suffering much too long. Jesus laments, but he does not seek protection, and he does change his course. Jesus says, “I have work to do,” and stretches his wings, his arms wide open, on the cross.

And on the third day, on the day of Resurrection, he finishes his work.