

March 17, 2019 - 2nd Sunday in Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 13:31-35

Check Your Schedule

You may have seen this cartoon: A guy is standing behind a desk in an office, in the windows behind him a skyline of a city. One of his hands holds a phone to his ear, the other hand has a finger on a small book, a planner, which is on the desk, open. His mouth is open, too, he's speaking into the phone. The caption has what he's saying, "No, Thursdays out. How about never—is never good for you?"

I think that cartoon illustrates today's gospel reading.

We're in the middle of Luke's gospel today, the wilderness temptations of last week are far behind Jesus, since then he's announced his mission in his hometown synagogue, he's chosen disciples and been teaching, blessing, healing, forgiving, feeding multitudes, calming storms. Now he's on his way to Jerusalem. He has "set his face to go to Jerusalem," as Luke puts it in Luke 9, the beginning of Jesus' journey to the cross, "When the days drew near, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jerusalem, the city that "kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." Jesus is on his way towards that city. In case or as if he weren't aware of what is in store, in today's gospel he's given a warning: people are out to get him.

It's interesting to note who gives Jesus this warning: it comes from "some Pharisees." We may be conditioned to think it's the Pharisees themselves who are out to get Jesus, but that doesn't seem to be the case here, and in other places, too. In the sequel to Luke's gospel, the book of Acts, some Pharisees become Christians.

Jesus' response to this warning is remarkable, in a number of ways. These Pharisees may be trying to help him, by cautioning him away from danger, but that's not the kind of help Jesus seeks. Jesus has little patience with attempts to protect him. Hearing what they say he calls Herod a fox. This is not because he finds Herod attractive. No, Jesus is less than impressed with Herod—which is not the typical response to such a tyrant. By all accounts, to all who lived then and there, Herod was a fearsome force. But not to Jesus. Jesus does not even deign to address Herod directly or by name, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they can pass a message on to "that fox" for him. Basically, Jesus makes the Pharisees—people who in many other instances are his adversaries—into his personal assistants, his messenger boys. Do you think they conveyed to Herod what Jesus said word for word, including the name calling?

But what comes next is even more dismissive—and funny. At least, it sounds funny to me. When I read these verses in Luke, this interchange that is only recorded in Luke—and how glad I am that it is, for the feminine, maternal imagery that appears near the end and—perhaps even more—for the fact that when given a dire warning about Herod, Jesus decides to check his schedule. "Herod wants to kill me?... Hmmm... Let me see, what do I have today, and tomorrow..." Herod wants to kill him and he pulls out his planner?! I almost think Jesus sounds sarcastic, "Herod wants to kill me? Hmmm... I'm casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow. And the third day is out. That third day is a really big one. Hmmm..." Jesus says, "When can I make space in my schedule to worry about Herod? How about never? Is never good for you?"

Jesus is too busy to bother with Herod. Today, tomorrow, and the next day, Jesus must be on his way. Today, tomorrow, and the third day.... In this briefest of gospel readings, these

words get repeated. Today, tomorrow, and the next day... Today, tomorrow and the third day... It could call to mind a similar phrase made famous in a play about a king who was crazy for power, the “Scottish play” by William Shakespeare. “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,” Macbeth says, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day.” Macbeth wasn’t checking his planner, he was espousing the creed of tyranny, what the crush of selfish power would have us believe: that it makes no difference, that it’s all the same, “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,” it all ends in death, and it all means nothing. “Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow... a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” That’s tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

That’s not what Jesus says. That’s not what Jesus is about. Jesus is about today, and tomorrow, and the third day.

Jesus has talked about that third day before, just a chapter ago, when Peter identified him as the Messiah, Jesus said, “Yes. And I will undergo suffering, and be rejected and killed, and on the third day, rise.” Jesus will talk about that third day again a couple chapters later, will say almost exact same thing about what will happen before it, and on it. And that third day will be referenced yet again, at the very end of Luke’s gospel, outside of an empty tomb. This time it won’t be Jesus who says it, but two men in dazzling clothes, messengers, who will tell terror-filled women, “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that he would be handed over, and crucified, and on the third day, rise?”

Make no mistake, there is plenty to be afraid of, the warning is not frivolous. Herod wants to kill Jesus, Herod, that fox. Meanwhile, Jesus wants to gather the children of Jerusalem, all it’s violence-prone citizens, Jesus wants to gather them like a mother hen gathers her chicks. The maternal metaphor that Jesus chooses is moving—all the more so, when we acknowledge that foxes kill hens. Jesus will die. As will we all.

This does not negate life, it hallows it. It is precious to us, time, the days that we have, each one different, and holy, and ours to fill. There are things we can do with it, with the days that we have: demons to cast out, cures to perform, work we can do, words we can say, people to whom we may draw close—our children, our city’s children, people who are easy to love, and people who have been our adversaries. Our days are precious. Why would we fill them with worry that others are out to get us? Why would we fill them—why do we fill them—with that which is meaningless? We do not need to live that way. Vulnerable, temporal creatures though we are, even in the midst of accurate warnings, even when death itself threatens, we have the power to choose—as Jesus’s hen metaphor also makes perfectly clear. Jesus wants to gather us, but Jesus will not force us. We are free to be unwilling.

Jesus invites us to draw under his wings. Jesus invites us to clear our schedules for him, for healing, and hope for today, and tomorrow, and the third day. Jesus invites us. How will we respond?