



From Here to Eternity - Part 3

A Sermon by Rev. Rich Brasher

Cleora United Methodist Church

February 28, 2010

*And God will raise you up on eagle's wings
Bare you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you ever in the palm of His hand*

Open your Bible to Luke, Chapter 13; Verse 31.

This morning we are continuing our Lenten message series called *From Here to Eternity*. In Part 1, we discovered that God is calling us to pray for Him to give us clean hearts and to remember the grace we received at our baptism, and we have taken Psalm 51, Verses 10 through 13 as our daily prayer during the Season of Lent:

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy
Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a
willing spirit, to sustain me.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you. (Psalm 51:10-13NIV)*

In Part 2, we learned that the only way to deal with temptation is to fully trust God and His Word, and to stay focused on Him and His will for us.

(By the way, if you miss any parts of this series, you can read them online. Just log onto our website at www.cleoraumc.org and click on the link provided on the homepage. In those, you'll

find my disclaimer about how and why I can't recommend that you read the novel this series is titled after too. - its all in there)

Today, in Part 3, we see yet one more way that Jesus' public ministry and our personal relationship with Him are both fashioned by a loving God for the expressed purpose of leading us from *here to eternity...*

Luke 13:31-35

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day-for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (NIV)

We live in a world that seems to be obsessed with status and power and consequently rife with political maneuverings. And that has never been more evident when we look at all that is going on today, not only in our own government, but all over the world. It's only natural that those who would seek governmental offices during a campaign or a potential rise to authority would seek to make themselves appear better than they really are (or their opponents appear worse than they really are).

We also encounter these kind of maneuverings on a more mundane basis. At work, a colleague slyly tries to take credit

for someone else's ideas or work. We call that "office politics." In the church, people jockey to influence the outcome of decisions about things like which ministries the church should be engaged in, or which ones should have the bulk of the budget dollars, or how mission monies will be spent, or even what color the new carpet will be. This we call "church politics," and too often it's not about the subject at hand, but it's really all about who is going to be in control.

Some people think Jesus was innocent - or ignorant - of the realities of politics. Those who think so must not have read the Gospels very closely and carefully.

Jesus of Nazareth was no stranger to political maneuvering. He was prone to saying things like, "*(when the kingdom of God arrives in its fullness), Indeed there are those who are last who would be first, and first who will be last*" (Luke 13:30). I can't think of anything that should more quickly alarm those on top of the political food chain than the suggestion that they might not end up at the top, but that some of those now relegated to the bottom, to last place, will ultimately be first!

Accordingly, Luke's Gospel tells us, "*at that time*" (or other translations say, "*at the very hour*") Jesus utters those words, some Pharisees arrive and tell him to flee immediately because Herod wants to kill Him (v. 31).

What is peculiar about this ostensibly protective warning is that the Pharisees have, to this point in the Gospel story, not been Jesus' friends. They have been among those most threatened by the "upside down" kingdom that Jesus has been teaching about. They are the "first" who Jesus has just said may end up last. Why, suddenly are these Pharisees so concerned for Jesus' safety?

Well, it's speculation at best, but more than likely they have an ulterior motive. Possibly they were in cahoots with Herod and

what they hoped for was to drive Jesus out of Herod's jurisdiction, and perhaps into the arms of Pilate and Pilates' area of responsibility. This would have been the equivalent of one of our state governors passing the buck on an issue of the state's responsibilities to the federal government. This way, at least, Herod can't be blamed for the results of this "troublemaker's" actions, and just maybe, Pilate can figure out a way to get rid of Jesus altogether.

It is important to note here that the Herod in this story is Herod Antipas - the son of Herod the Great. He was placed and kept in power in Jerusalem by the Roman government, who even themselves refused to recognize him as a king, but rather the "ruler of a quarter part." He did not inherit a throne passed down from David as God clearly had willed, and he was not the Hebrew people's choice, but he had been placed in authority by the Romans. And Jesus, like many of His contemporaries, likely regarded the Herod Antipas as a usurper, who had no right to the kingdom promised by God to David. . In fact, were it not for Roman rule, Antipas might have been overthrown long before.

So, at least for the moment, Antipas was on top. And while it probably cheered the hearts of many of those who heard Jesus say that the first might end up last and vice-versa, it certainly wouldn't have thrilled Antipas, who sat on an already unstable perch, and it couldn't have made the Pharisees (who supported the "system" because the "system" supported them) very happy either.

Admittedly, it's speculation to guess at the motives of those who come to Jesus with Herod's threat. What is clear, however, is that Jesus, in any event, responds to the outwardly friendly warning as if it were an instance of political maneuvering. "*Go tell that fox...*" he says, revealing that He knows these Pharisees are in cahoots with the conniving, calculating Herod Antipas.

What Jesus implied by calling Herod a "fox" is not really clear. In Hellenistic thought, the fox is regarded as clever by sly and unprincipled. The Old Testament associates the fox with destruction (Song 2:15; Ezekiel 13:4), Jewish dietary laws classified the jackal as an unclean animal. In any case, Jesus' words reflect the disdain He held for Antipas. Jesus dismissed Antipas as powerless to prevent Him from carrying on the mission to establish God's rule on earth. We see this same theme throughout the Gospel of John (John 7:30; 8:20; 8:59; 10:39; 11:54).

So here Jesus steps up to Herod's challenge, and He lets the Pharisees and Herod know, right off the bat, that He not politically naive. He is fully aware that the kingdom He proclaims - and enacts by, casting out demons and healing people today and tomorrow especially among the poor and the typically neglected - is an affront to the powers that be.

More than that, He informs them that His challenge will go all the way to the top. He will not stop in the provinces but will proceed, on His own time, to the capital city of Jerusalem. So Pilate will be confronted soon enough. It is as though Jesus makes it clear that the discomfiting politics of His kingdom will not stop at entering the doors of the local governments and belief systems, but will proceed right onto the doorstep of the highest levels of governments and belief systems. All the way to Jerusalem - the city that kills the prophets and murders those sent to it for its own welfare (vv.33-34).

As a side note, this accusation that Jerusalem is the city that kills prophets reflects popular Jewish tradition, rather than the Bible, which is silent on the fate of the prophets. For example, *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*, a first century C.E. work, asserts that Manasseh had Isaiah sawed in half - a legend found in the Talmud and other early Jewish works. While the Old Testament doesn't speak of Isaiah's death, Hebrews 11:37 may be an allusion to this legend where Paul writes about the prophets;

"They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-" (NIV) Of course, the Old Testament often portrays Jerusalem's behavior as symptomatic of Israel's failure to heed God's word (e.g. Isaiah 3:8; Jeremiah 13:27; Ezekiel 16:2).

If Jesus expects scorn and violence in Jerusalem, He does not return that hateful rage with rage of His own. The opening words of His speech (calling Herod a demeaning name, recalling and predicting murderous actions) could easily lead to a revolutionary diatribe. Kill the prophet killers! Burn spiteful Jerusalem to the ground!

Instead, His oration veers into a motherly lament: "*how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*" (v.34).

At these words, Jesus' original hearers could not have helped but pick up on echoes of frequent Old Testament references to the God of Israel as the one "*under whose wings you have come for refuge*" (Ruth 2:12, see also Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, and 61:4).

With these surprising words, the mighty appear in a new light: Herod Antipas, these plotting Pharisees, the power players in Jerusalem, all the first who would be first - then and now - they want to see themselves as masters of the universe, invulnerable and imperial behind their relentless, foxy maneuvering. Jesus calls their death-dealing by name, yet He also sees them as barnyard chicks lost in a storm, too afraid and too stubborn to find shelter under the shadow of mother hen's wings. What these overlords would have others hear as a fearsome canine growl emerges as an almost comic cheeping.

The judgment that will yet fall on them, if they don't change their ways, will be the judgment of their own self-destruction: "*Look, your house is left to you desolate*" (v.35).

Politics go on. In government, in society, and in the church. But there is a living and loving God, who wants us all to gather under His motherly wings - to receive His protection and the comfort He has to offer us. To replace our focus with being or becoming first with a focus on becoming His servant whom He protects and nurtures - to go with Him *from here to an eternity* under His wings of love.

But,...politics notwithstanding,...are we willing to be among the many "last" who Jesus said will end up "first," - are we willing to submit - to surrender - to even admit we even need to be protected under His wings?