

“The Path: Getting Off Track”

17 March 2019: 2nd Sunday in Lent

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 13:31-35

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**“People who count their chickens before they are hatched, act very wisely,
because chickens run about so absurdly that it is impossible to count them accurately” (—Oscar Wilde).**

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A bracing idea I remembered this week suggests that Lent is both a time of preparation for Easter and baptism. This idea appeals to modern believers who want a more “hands on” Christian experience than “just hearing about” the Christian life. Our generation wants to know Jesus, not just know about Jesus. Today we demand that faith be pertinent. Of course, paradoxically too many think 2000-year events do not pertain to us today. Yet, the early church used Lent for baptism preparation. It is hard to focus on Salado, when our Lenten readings focus on Jerusalem. Yet, according to the late Fred Craddock: “For Luke, Jerusalem is central for both the Gospel and Acts. Luke refers to Jerusalem ninety times; the entire remainder of the New Testament, forty-nine” (*Luke*, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1990, p. 174).

In our lesson, the Pharisees counsel Jesus to flee Herod Antipas’ Galilee territory. Herod the Great, Herod Antipas’ father, died soon after Jesus birth. To Jesus, Herod is “that fox:” sly and politically driven. Herod Antipas will not cut short Jesus’ earthly ministry. Rather, Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem endures. Jesus restores to people God’s intended relationship. Jerusalem, not Herod, has claim on God’s delegates!

Jerusalem is to be the place of Jesus crucifixion. In verses 34-35, Jesus laments over the city and its religious leaders. Perhaps verse 34 alludes to Jesus’ exhaustive effort to bring the Judeans to him—something not detailed in the other Gospels. The city’s residents, rejecting him now, will not see him again until they shout “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” They shout as he enters the city triumphantly on Palm Sunday. Hear the day’s lesson:

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ 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! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’ ” (Luke 13:31-35).

Two key details seize our attention. The first is, as you noticed: “Why did the Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod?” Other Gospels regularly put Pharisees in the worst possible light. Other Gospels, usually, exhibit Pharisees as Jesus’ foes. Why here do they help Jesus by warning him about Herod? A cynical reading of their plot reveals an evil strategy to get rid of Jesus. But this fails to account for details of Luke/Acts—where on occasion Jesus and the disciples receive the Pharisees.

Jesus and the Pharisees, no doubt, argued long and hard about the fine points of Hebrew law. Yet Luke is more sympathetic to Pharisees than other Gospel writers. When brought before the Jewish council about Peter and John we read: “When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up . . .” (Acts 5:33-34). In Acts 23:6, Paul says not that he **was** a Pharisee. He says, rather, “I **am** a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.” Luke clearly presents Pharisees in a better light than the other Gospel writers. Perhaps, the Pharisees that Luke writes about here realize that although they have their own quarrels with Jesus, they have much more in common with him than they have in common with Herod—or the Romans. Maybe, we would do well to remember this lesson from time to time. Too often, we quarrel with the very people who are, in the big picture, more our allies than adversaries.

An American recital hall scheduled Ignace Jan Paderewski, the famed Polish composer-pianist, to perform. In the audience was a mother with a fidgety nine-year-old son. Weary of waiting, the boy slipped from her side, oddly drawn to the stage Steinway. Without much notice, he sat down and began playing “chopsticks.” The crowd yelled, “Get that boy away from there!” When Paderewski heard the uproar backstage, he rushed over behind the boy. Reaching around him, the master began to improvise a countermelody to “Chopsticks.” As the two of them played together, Paderewski kept whispering in the boy’s ear, “Keep going. Don’t quit, son . . . don’t stop . . . don’t stop” (*Today in the Word*, Moody Bible Institute, Jan, 1992, p. 8). Cooperation—not obstruction. Here is another more serious case:

Annually in Alaska, a 1000-mile dogsled race, run for prize money and prestige, remembers an original “race” to save lives. In January 1926, six-year-old Richard Stanley showed symptoms of diphtheria, signaling a prospect of an outbreak in Nome. When the boy passed away a day later, Dr. Curtis Welch began immunizing children and adults with an experimental but effective anti-diphtheria serum. Soon Dr. Welch’s supply ran out. The nearest serum was in Nenana, Alaska—1000 wilderness miles away. A group of trappers and prospectors astonishingly offered to cover the distance with their dog teams!

Working in relays from trading post to trapping station and beyond, one sled started from Nome while another, carrying the serum, started from Nenana. Oblivious to frostbite, fatigue, and exhaustion, the teamsters munched until, after 144 hours in minus 50-degrees with strong winds, they delivered the serum to Nome. Thus, the town lost only one other life to the potential epidemic. Their sacrifice had given an entire town the gift of life.

When people work together for a common goal, superb things can happen.

In reality, Luke’s favorable treatment of the Pharisees gave Jesus another opportunity to teach further about God’s mission. Jesus’ teaching occasion provides a second, thought-provoking matter about this passage. After the Pharisees warned Jesus, he declared that he must go on to Jerusalem because “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Jesus declared himself a prophet. Prophets love their people so much that they have little regard for their own lives.

In an odd Gospel image, Jesus says about the holy city Jerusalem: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Of all the images Jesus could have selected out of an aviary, a hen or chicken seems most bizarre! Chickens scuttle about, they hunt and peck for food. We certainly have never thought of chickens as models for

intelligent animal life. They are awkward and plainly not aerodynamic. An eagle has majesty. Swans are beautiful and the mourning dove has a beautiful and maudlin quality about its call. Penguins are good swimmers and storks have, in some cultures, the reputation for bringing people good luck. Even hummingbirds can fly backward and are curious enough to gain our attention. But the lowly hen? To suggest this as an image of God is so remarkable, undignified, and unsettling that we hardly know what to do with it. If a hen is a metaphor for God it is hard to imagine what kind of a God to which Jesus points (*Aha!!!, "Is God a Chicken?"* 8 March 1998, p. 47)! Jesus points to a God so unusual and magnificent that we can hardly get our minds around it.

Why does Jesus weep over Jerusalem? For the same reason he would weep over Salado. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Herod the Fox preys on the young of others; Jesus gathers his people like a hen does her chicks.

I leave you of this image of a chicken and hen: A barnyard fire burned through a farm. The animals and birds simply did not have enough time to run. When the fire was over, the farmer inspected the damage. There was a hen, wings spread wide, feathers black and burned. The hen was dead.

But as the farmer picked up the dead hen, out scampered her half dozen chicks. Just before the fire, she had gathered them under her in the face of danger. And she gave her life to save them (*Aha!!!, "A Life Given,"* 8 March 1998, pp. 47-48). Jesus said: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Could this be a word to the wise?

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