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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 13:31-35; Psalm 27

13 March 2022

From Fear to Compassion

Opening Prayer:

Let us pray: God of compassion and empathy, you created this universe with the potential for love and hope and care and life and peace, but we, your image-bearers, have done our best to tell you that we know better the way to manage our lives and your good creation. Forgive us for living in fear of not having enough, in fear of our enemies, in fear of those different from us, and in fear of your calling on each of our lives. You have chosen each of us to join your way of compassion. Fill us with your spirit anew to walk in your ways. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Message:

As we continue our series, Seeking God's Ways, we step into another dimension of trust this morning. Last week, we explored the story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness and how trusting in God's ways, trusting in God's will for this world, alters our need for security and transforms it into generosity. We are often tempted to think that we can secure what we need on our own, yet even Jesus relinquished his ability to do it on his own and instead spent most of his ministry and even these early moments in the wilderness trusting God's calling and plan for his life. The challenge for us today is to not allow our fears or our needs for security to shape the ways that we embrace the generosity and compassion what God has called us to.

When we enter either of our scripture texts this morning, we are immediately met with fear. Even in the Psalmist's declaration that the Lord is light, salvation and refuge, we hear right away in verse 2 about adversaries, evildoers, foes, and enemy armies. The same is true of the warning from some of the Pharisees to Jesus about Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, the king that we heard about when Jesus was born. Fear drives Herod's perception of Jesus as a threat, and fear of Herod's wrath drives the Pharisees warnings to Jesus. We must remember that Herod was king of Galilee and had arrested John the Baptist before beheading him. Jesus fills in the void left by John the Baptist's ministry in the wilderness of Judea by beginning his own ministry in Galilee, except that this time, Jesus's disciples are not only baptizing as John had done, Jesus is also leading crowds of people around the rural part of Galilee, which could spell disaster for Herod if these crowds turn into a mob or militia. If the empire had to step in and crush a peasant rebellion in Galilee, they would not stop only with the peasants. The empire would be sure to remove whoever would have been responsible for keeping the peace: Herod.

Just before the Pharisees' warnings though in Luke 13, Jesus has just finished a speech on how the unexpected will be the first ones at the banquet table when the kingdom of God comes in its fullness. In his usual cryptic tone, Jesus warns his audience that some of the last shall be first, and the first shall be last in verse 30. When the Pharisees come to him with this warning about Herod, Jesus has the perfect opportunity to highlight this teaching in another light. Jesus's singular purpose of getting to Jerusalem keeps him steady as he responds to their concerns and anxieties about his safety. If anything was true about wandering teachers, leaders, and healers in the first century, it was that they were often killed by local authorities because of the risk of revolt and unrest. As I mentioned earlier, Herod's concern about Jesus is real. Talk of any kingdom other than the Roman empire was reason enough for Herod to track Jesus closely.

Yet, Jesus's spoken response to the fear in the Pharisee's report is not a mockery, nor is it an acknowledgement of Herod's power over him. Instead, Jesus calls Herod's bluff and tells the Pharisees to go tell Herod that Jesus is going to continue his work until God's purposes are completed. Jesus calls Herod to account for what he really is, a fox seeking to consume and destroy his own people for his own gain. Jesus's later metaphor brings his insult of Herod to the fore as Jesus refers to himself as a true shepherd-king, the kind of king that Herod should be, the king who like a hen gathers her brood of chicks under her wings when the engulfing fire threatens the innocent with destruction.

Jesus gives Herod a hint of what that completion, that fulfilment of God's intention will look like then in verse 33. Jesus will complete his work but not in Galilee, not under Herod's jurisdiction, what might come as a message of relief when Herod hears it. God's intentions will be fulfilled in Jerusalem, for no prophet is killed outside of Jerusalem, at least according to the Jewish traditions of the first century. While the Hebrew scriptures, or the Old Testament, do not have much to say in the way of prophets dying in Jerusalem, by the time that Nehemiah has been written, the city of God has become known for this tragedy. This tradition was then reinforced by a text from the same time period as Jesus called *Lives of the Prophets*, which makes a similar case about Jerusalem. Jesus's status as a rabbi, prophet, healer, and Messiah will all come to a swift end as Luke has been hinting at since chapter 10, but it won't be at the hands of the fox, Herod Antipas.

In a strange sense, Jesus's words are compassionate toward Herod. Jesus reassures him that he is not here to take the throne from him but has all of the intention of ending his mission in Jerusalem. While we may not fully understand what Jesus means when he says that no prophet can be killed outside of Jerusalem and we have heard about the traditions that have come to

define the city, we must also realize that what Jesus also is highlighting is how dangerous Jerusalem has become for anyone hinting at being the Messiah. Each year at Passover because of the symbolic nature of the celebration of freedom from Egypt, there was almost always some kind of violent uprising against the Roman authorities in Jerusalem. Often, political prisoners were crucified not long before major Jewish holidays as a way of warning the people and visitors to the city of what would happen if they were to usurp the peace that Rome had brought.

Yet again, we must remember that Jesus's desire for Jerusalem is not to incite another insurrection or violent revolt, though many of his followers and others might have assumed that those were his veiled intentions. But, Jesus's compassion comes through clearly as he speaks of the city that had become the center of Jewish theology. Jesus longs to take in his cultural brothers and sisters as a hen gathers her chicks to protect them from all that can happen in such an explosive situation. Rather than fear all of the ways that he could be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, abused, or worse in Jerusalem, Jesus comes to his people, fully aware of all of the ways that leadership in government and the temple have left them to be consumed by the conquering forces of empire. Jesus will show his people and the ruling authorities, though in entirely unexpected ways, what it looks like to shelter the people from the fires of violence, oppression, evil, death, destruction, and so much more by receiving it in his own body as a mother hen would sacrifice herself to be scorched and burned to death so that her chicks could live. In the first century, fire was a necessary and constant threat to people's homes and livelihoods. If a fire did get out of control, little could be done to stop it from taking its full course, which means that anything in its path would be consumed. In order for a hen to protect its chicks in such a situation, the hen would gather her chicks under her wings and take the full heat of the fire, even sacrificing her life.

Jesus gives his audience the briefest hint of when this all will happen. When the crowds say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” when Jesus rides on a donkey colt into Jerusalem just before Passover, then the time has come, but it’s not here yet, so Herod can rest assured that Jesus is not an imminent threat to him or to any other authorities, at least as much as they assume Jesus as a threat might look. Jesus will enter Jerusalem in compassion, realizing fully that his posture of sacrifice and humility is the only way to show that violence will not bring about the new covenant and kingdom that have been promised since the end of exile. We notice though the longing in Jesus’s words just like the longing in the words of Psalm 27. While following God’s way of redemption will lead to his death, Jesus also knows that the people of Jerusalem will totally miss what is happening because they continue to operate in fear.

We cannot fault those around Jesus for their misconceptions of his intentions. What seems to be built into each of us is a fight-or-flight response, which is a survival tool, but one almost entirely built on fear and threat. We can identify compassionately with the responses of all of the characters around Jesus as their fear and anxiety drive them to respond to Jesus in their own ways. However, Jesus does not allow his audience, nor does Jesus allow us off the hook for letting our fears determine our actions. Rather, Jesus calls us out as he does to Herod, asking us to live with compassion. Compassion is the ability to see the world or reality from another’s point of view, seeking to understand better where they are coming from and what they are experiencing. For many years, the leaders of the nation of Israel had been anything but compassionate, often operating in exactly the same fear patterns as the conquering nations that had caused them so much harm in the past. Again, though, we cannot fault them for this. We struggle to work at the unfolding war in Ukraine with compassion. While we may not have American troops fighting the war, the American government is still providing support in the

form of weapons and military equipment for the Ukrainians. Are there not more creative options for peace than guns, nuclear threats, and missiles. How can we speak compassionately into such a precarious situation? But it's too easy to only think of situations that are far from our everyday experience. How does fear like the need for security drive each of our actions from moment to moment rather than seeking to understand better what is happening or what others' experiences are? Can we join with the Psalmist in saying that we will wait for the Lord, rather than only cooperating with our fight-or-flight tendencies? Will you wait and see with compassion?

Closing Prayer:

God, you are our light and our salvation. You are the stronghold of our life; of whom shall we be afraid? We seek a home in you. We seek a heart of curiosity. We seek an eye for beauty. Grounded in you, sheltered by your wings, you reveal a world unfolding in layers of love. Though we will suffer in the journey before us, our consent to your way of compassion makes us strong. Continue to gather and release, O God, as we peck out our path. In Jesus' name. Amen.