

2nd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.16.25

Philippians 3:17-21

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Luke 13:31-35

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.’” (286)

SNL has this bit—Saturday Night Live. You would see it on Weekend Update, their spoof news program. The anchor introduces the topic, say a vote in the senate; and a headshot of the key player comes up on the screen, say a picture of a grinning Mitch McConnell, someone commonly accepted as the bad guy; the anchor gives context to the headshot, which is where the punchline is. “Senator Mitch McConnell, seen here having just kicked a puppy...” See, having seen only a picture of Mitch McConnell grinning, now we understand *why* he’s grinning—and it’s something no one should grin at.

To explain the joke still more, what transpires in this is the transvaluation of values. This is the transformation that happens when someone finally recognizes that what had once given him pride actually ought to be a cause for shame, that what had been felt as glory was actually deep shame: Paul saying of certain people he has in mind, “Their pride is in their shame.” The transvaluation of values. You shouldn’t kick puppies. It really doesn’t say a lot about you if you do.

You probably already know that.

But some people do kick puppies.

The phrase “transvaluation of values” is an English translation of a German phrase that Frederick Nietzsche came up with. He was no fan of this process, when your gleeful puppy-kicking

is now something you see differently, now something you deeply regret and might even confess to God about it, God who likewise doesn't approve of puppy-kicking.

Nietzsche was no fan of this because he thought this wimpification of one person here and then one person there would lead to the wimpification of whole societies, and then where would we be? No, he was rooting for the *Übermensch*, the one who could stoically put away such wimpiness, or even (better) gleefully put away such wimpiness, and do the hard things that need to be done: kicking puppies, slashing SNAP benefits, cutting off healthcare for veterans, crushing Canada. Won't everyone be impressed by such strength and resolve; yea, filled with fear? Now *that's* power.

Unless, of course, you've been Christianized. Unless your perspective has been altered by the cross. If it's that, then you probably think taking food away from poor people is a shameful thing to do. You probably think crucifying someone whose crime is practicing compassion rather than strict lawfulness is a horrifying thing to do. Time was crucifying someone who wouldn't even fight back would get you a seat at the cool kids' table, or a box seat at the gladiatorial games. From there you could point and laugh while the one on the cross suffered and died. Now, you'd get canceled if you did that.

Bummer.

Sarcasm isn't great in the pulpit, is it?

I'll do better.

Paul writes to the Philippians in chains. That's what he says, that he's writing to them while he himself is in chains, imprisoned because once again he was disturbing the peace, though which time we're not sure. Paul was imprisoned a lot, or so it seems, but there aren't historical records of such things that we can trust as objective truth. There *is* the biblical book, Acts of the Apostles, which serves as a touchstone but not as strict record. There, when you match possible timelines with Paul's many letters, there are two times of imprisonment that this could be, the Roman imprisonment and the earlier Caesarean imprisonment.

For what it's worth, scholar Jim Reijer has suggested that this letter likely stems from the second period, the much harsher Roman imprisonment, attested to by early church fathers, the main reasons for his thinking being several.

First, the letter's highly developed theory of church suggests it comes late in Paul's life. Such highly developed ecclesiology reflects the passage of time and serious thought—because it wasn't immediately clear what the apostles should do following the shocking events of Easter

Sunday: the empty tomb, the resurrected Christ and his then ascension. It wasn't immediately clear that they should gather in groups, *ekklesias* or assemblies or indeed churches, and they should enact Jesus' presence and invoke his holy name.

This was an understanding whose support was the developing theory of how Christians are to *be* with one another and in the world. With no clear Law or Commandments to follow, what should these Christians do and how should imagine the effect of their doing in this pained world? To transform the world by the appeal of a beloved community? To be as leavening in its midst? Paul spent his life brooding on this theory, raising it up that it might fly eventually without him, and the shape it takes in the Letter to the Philippians seems developed to the degree that this comes late in his life and work.

Then there's the impending sense of death permeating the letter, Paul seeming quite sure that his life would soon end—and not because he was aging but because he was provoking ever more powerful people who had no patience for this slow transvaluation he was encouraging. His preaching was disturbing the peace, its pointing out the world's glory is actually its shame.

This spreading of the gospel would indeed upend social values, would undermine political intimidation and drain the power of kings like Herod of that very power's source: their gleeful willingness to use deadly force. If the people are unafraid of your threats of death, then your power has gone out from you. Sure, you can kill one of them. You could kill ten. But if this doesn't send a chill through the populace, if they aren't terrified of your menacing use of power, then your power has gone out from you.

The power of kings is the power to kill with impunity, or imprison with impunity. The power of the state is the state's monopoly on violence: only the state is allowed to use it. But if the people aren't afraid, then what's the king, what's the state, what are the powers and principalities without their striking fear in the hearts of those gathered under their pall?

Finally, the apparent harsh treatment underlying the Letter to Philippians suggests Paul was in a Roman prison, not in the open house arrest of earlier, simpler times.

Things were getting serious for him. This new way of seeing, this new seeing by the light of the cross: it was upending everything. Or it *could*—if the people were to go along.

And maybe they would. But maybe they wouldn't. Not everyone can live in the Kingdom of God while the kingdoms of this world bear their fangs.

Jesus in our gospel passage was amidst the teeter-totter of which the people would choose. He was, as we read this morning, amidst the time in Luke's gospel that has him yet wandering in

his ministry, teaching here, healing there. There's this ten-chapter span, in the middle of which we are this morning, wherein our gospel writer offers a grab-bag of stories necessary to include but not in any important order. These things happened, people remember. They happened here or they happened there, anywhere in or around Galilee. He was not yet in Jerusalem, where he knew it would end, where the confrontation he knew he had to have with the powers of his day—political, religious—would take place, in the rightful place, this gleaming city, this mighty Temple, the Herodian Temple as it were, one built long before the terrible reign of the two Herods, but one made all the mightier and more impressive when Herod the elder came to power and made his ego-needed improvements.

Here he would have his palace and throne. Here he would sit astride the two streams that kept the Temple so busy, the stream of Jewish elders and priests, and of common Jews themselves come to the Temple for their cultic practice, come also for justice and redress; and so also the stream of imperial machinations, the Herodians in close contact with the Roman Empire of far beyond but which found it was needing to keep an ever tighter grip on tiny, backwater Judea and Israel.

To think of the Temple as synonymous to a church as we know churches in our lives, these little outposts of earnest gatherings, or indeed as a synagogue, a bustling school for Jewish local, diasporic life and learning, is to mis-imagine it. The Temple was as much a place for political wrangling as it was for scriptural study or sacrificial offering.

And Jerusalem was indeed a city of worldly pride as much as of genuine humility. It did indeed kill those who were sent to it, stone those who'd come with a word of how better to live, how better to sustain amidst the world while also being true to their original charter, being amidst the world yet as a beloved community wherein certain care is offered for the likes of the orphan and the widow and the stranger in their midst.

Jerusalem would get bellicose, and a prophet would come and say, "Remember why we are, not for glory in war but for glory in mutual care." Judea would want to take a place among the super-powerful, and a prophet could come and say, "That is not what we are to be." Those prophets never fared well. Rarely did they even survive.

That's where Jesus was headed, where the mighty Temple loomed large, though would, by the time of Luke's writing, have suffered its own destruction. This is where Jesus was headed, and with hope of being himself a Temple, a place of sheltering love and shared sacrifice. He would be

as a hen gathering in her chicks, gathering them under her wings to brood on them that they might be safe and that they might grow and thrive even in their mother hen's eventual absence.

The question is whether this sort of shelter would do. In this big dangerous world, amidst this prideful lot, the human being, would it do to have a mere hen's wings over your head while the builders of bombs are busy with their work and the builders of rockets let them explode in the sky over your head, to rain debris on your loved ones.

Remember the movie, "Batman Vs. Superman." I didn't see it. I didn't feel like I needed to. I figured I already knew what would happen. These two superheroes would take to the sky for their fight, and they'd topple buildings and crash elevated trains and rain terror on Gotham below (or was it Metropolis?) and the audience would be asked to choose their favorite to win, and I'd sit there in the dark theater rooting for that guy who was just crushed by that building. Played by an extra, of course. An extra. With heroes like these, who need villains?

But that's just me. I've been Christianized—or at least I hope I've been.

I suppose that hasn't really been tested yet.

I hope it won't be.

But it might.

There's this funny evocation here, in the exchange Jesus has with the Pharisees who've come to tell Jesus, "Get away from here for Herod wants to kill you."

To be clear, in case I haven't been already, it's plausible that Herod would do this. After all, Herod the elder had long ago tried to, the one mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. That was this Herod's father, who was king back when Jesus was a baby in Bethlehem. It was this Herod's father who purportedly had all the boys under the age of two killed—all for fear of this one storied baby, Jesus, who was born under the promise to be King of the Jews, this when there was already a king of the Jews. It was Herod. The Herod now being said to want to kill Jesus was his son. He was the one who'd had Jesus' cousin killed, John the Baptizer, murdered because of a dare at a dinner party, his head on platter. All of this is to say, this was hardly idle talk: "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

But Jesus hardly seemed concerned, though he seem unconcerned for all the wrong reasons. He wasn't unconcerned because he figured Herod didn't actually want that or wouldn't actually do that. No, he was unconcerned because such a thing would only be done in Jerusalem. And he wasn't in Jerusalem. I mean, not yet. He would, apparently, yet be heading there. He didn't take this warning and insight as cause for not going there. It's just that he knew it wouldn't

happen right now. And so, his snark in reply: “Go tell that fox I’m gonna keep doing what I’m doing. I’ll get to him later.” And then he casts himself as that hen, that powerful hen from the perspective of her chicks, but that vulnerable hen from the perspective of the fox. See, there was coming very soon a hen to the fox-house, and the question is whether anyone would willingly gather as if for safe shelter under those but feathered wings.

This is the question coming to people in power these days, those we’ve elected, those who’ve been exalted through the ranks of business and commerce. Are you going to save your skin? Are you gonna serve your own bottom line or secure your Senate seat for yourself? Or are you gonna serve us chicks? Will your glory be your glory or will your glory be your shame?

The question could come to each of us as well. May we be resilient in our residing in heaven as we also move amidst this fraught world for the question might come.

Thanks be to God.