

Luke 13:31-35

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 away from 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." '*

The City that Kills - March 13, 2022

Luke 13:31-35

Although we are still a few weeks away from the official start of spring, it is easy to see the changes happening around us. I think it's safe to say we've seen the last of the super-cold temperatures. We've already had two 70-degree plus days. If you look carefully at the trees, you'll see that the buds are starting to swell as we prepare to see the new flowers and leaves.

At my school this week, we made the wearing of COVID masks optional. Almost all the staff and over three-quarters of the students are vaccinated. Only the kindergarten and first grade children are still mostly masking. It was quite wondrous to see us acting and pretty much looking like a school again. My colleagues were not aware that I had grown a mustache during the pandemic. Children were once again sitting together in clusters in the classrooms, making them all seem bigger.

Today we welcome four new members to our congregation. Our friend Fred Velez, who recently moved to Collingswood and found our church despite the pandemic is a marvelous example of how God's Spirit leads us to worship in spite of the difficulties that sometimes get thrown in our way.

We also welcome three members of our confirmation class, Ajay Ostrem, who read from the book of Genesis, Matthew Will, who offered his musical talent, and Lily Corso, who shared our responsive reading of the Psalm today.

New members, like the new officers we installed last week, are indeed a great blessing to the church. The Church of Jesus Christ goes on. It takes different forms, worships in different places, attracts different people, but we go on.

Friends, it is hard to believe that just 13 years ago, we were looking at what some people were calling "the end of history." Ajay, Matthew, and Lily, just about the time you were born, our nation was installing the first African-American President, Barak Obama. At the same time, the nation of Russia was enjoying enormous prosperity and we were looking forward to a time of peace. Nations were coming together to discuss real steps to stop climate change. Yes, we faced the worst recession in living memory, but there were many good things happening as well.

But here we are in 2022. We are all aware of the war being fought in Ukraine. We see each night the devastation, refugees, and the adamant refusal of Vladimir Putin to back down until he's destroyed as much of Ukraine as he can. We have no idea how long this war will last or how much suffering there will be all around the world.

This week, the United Nations issued its most dire warning regarding climate change. It is real and it is obvious. The Amazon Rain Forest, which is a major source for the oxygen we breathe, is being rapidly destroyed. We are seeing violent weather rack our nation almost every week. Yet, many pretend nothing is happening and refuse to take things seriously.

Remember when I said that 13 years ago we were supposedly at the “end of history.” By that, I meant some foolishly believed the world was entering a new era of peace, prosperity, justice, and equality. Some went so far as to say with Barack Obama as President, America was now a “post-racial” nation. Yes, some said racism was a thing of the past.

But we all know how false this prophecy turned out to be. The shameful death of George Floyd and hundreds of black men like him at the hands of police starkly reminded us that racism is very much alive. From the white supremacist marches in Charlottesville, to the former president fomenting hatred toward Asian-Americans, it is clear that division is the norm. Furthermore, we have powerful news outlets who exist only to insure we remind divided, because the more hate there is, the more money they make.

Friends, old and new, our task is to tell you the way things are, not how we wish them to be. For too many believers, the church is a fantasy escape world which is divorced from the reality of what is going on out there. Many people believe our function is to sing melodies about the “Sweet-by-and-by” and ignore the fact that real human beings are in danger all over the world.

But that is not what Jesus thought. Once again, we see from scripture yet another story of Jesus speaking the truth and making the religious leaders of his day upset. Listen to what Jesus said: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

In other words, the prophets were the ones appointed by God to speak truth to the rulers, whether they liked it or not. Over and over again, the Bible is filled with stories of prophets criticizing Israel, calling for justice, calling for an end to oppression, calling for equality. And all of the biblical prophets, every one, encountered opposition, even to the point of death.

Jesus, of course, put himself squarely in the center of the prophetic tradition. In today’s passage, Jesus makes it clear that he knows his is about to die for speaking the truth. He knows that his message is unpopular with those in power. He came to show God’s love to the world and the world responded to him with hate and fear, and death.

And today, two thousand years later, we still live surrounded by hate and fear and death.

The outlook for humanity looks bleak, doesn't it? Human beings are marching headlong toward self destruction, aren't they? But the truth is we can only exist by loving each other, caring about each other, gathering us together, as Jesus said, "As a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

Yet, despite all the hatred, despite all the war, despite all the ignorance and fear around us there is hope. And you, my friends, are that hope.

Ajay, Matthew, Lily, and Fred, you are hope because Jesus Christ has called you and you have responded. You have chosen to follow him.

Let me read to the congregation some of what you have written:

"I understand Jesus Christ as being one of the people that I worship alongside God. Not only do we look at the way that he lived but we also look at the similarities between our lives and more. I have come to understand the many sacrifices he has made for us to live on and, with proficient enough teachings, believe that anyone is able to recognize his contributions to our lives even if he is over 2000 years old. Because of this deep relation I have found with Jesus' life and ours, It has prompted me to seeing more of what is going on in the world and contributed to my viewings of the church community."

Another wrote, "To me now, Jesus is more than the ultimate role model, but I know I can never be as great. He lived a life of love and caring for everyone and that's exactly how I want to leave my mark on this earth. Unfortunately, I am no less human than anyone and that's why church is important to me."

Finally, in the form of a poem, we hear, "Jesus, Why did you die for our sins? / Jesus, Why did God choose you? / Jesus, Was it because you were Mary's child? / Jesus, Was it because Gabriel, Heaven's messenger, went to your mother? / Jesus, Did you have to come back from the dead? / Jesus, Why were you baptized? / Jesus, Why did you go through all that pain for our mistakes? / Jesus, Why is your home heaven and not earth? / Jesus, Help me to understand your actions. / Jesus, why did you do all of this for us? / Why did you, out of all people, do this for us? / Why did you do this, even though people around you didn't like nor trust you?"

My friends, these are your words and they are powerful words. In these words you are making a choice, the most important choice you can ever make in your lives. In these words which you have written, you are telling yourselves, you are telling us, and you are telling God the path you are going to follow in your life. You are choosing to align yourself with the truth and love of Jesus Christ and not the lies and hatred of the world.

And friends, can we all finally admit that we all have to make the same choice? Tell me, tell me, can someone please tell me what placing our confidence and trust in human leaders and human choices has bought us? Look around, look around, at wars, at famines, at Covid, at hatred, at racism, at killings in our streets, at crumbling roads, at rising waters, at tornados and hurricanes. How can it, how can it, how can it be that the vast majority of the world's wealth is locked up in the hands of a few thousand individuals? How can it be that we tolerate lies from our news outlets, oppression of the poor, curable diseases flourishing because we won't spend the money to bring healing? This is the legacy of humanity and I'm sorry to say that this is the world you are inheriting.

Now, I am hardly saying that the state of humanity in 2022 is somehow exponentially worse than any other time in history. The world has been teetering on the edge of disaster long before Jesus began spreading the good news.

But this is the point, friends. The good news, the best news of all, is that there is an alternative, a real alternative for humanity. The good news is that we are not locked into following the human way of doing things. The good news is that love is real and love can change the world and that love is the prism through which we can view each other in spite of all that is going wrong day.

Yes, the good news is that today, in this small corner of the world, in this little church in this little town in this little state you are rejecting the world, turning your back on hatred, and instead accepting Jesus and his way as the guide star of your lives. And that is surely the best news of all.

When we began our lessons a year ago, I hope you recall that I congratulated you for making a difficult choice. After all, we know that few of your friends go to a church or even know what church is. Jesus Christ for most is only an excuse to have parties at Christmas and Easter. Very few really know him or understand him.

But you, you, you have made that choice, you have committed yourselves to learn and grow and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and that makes all the difference. The church of the future will never be popular. The days are long past when the pews were full and everyone worshipped. The message of Jesus is still unpopular because it still opposes the human way of thinking.

But you know the truth. You know that if humanity is to have chance, you know that if your children and your children's children are to have a future, then Jesus' way of love is the only way for humanity and you want to be part of it! It will never be easy, but it will always be right!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.