

Psalm 27 ~ Luke 13:31-35
*Full to the Brim: Under God's Wing*ⁱ
2nd Sunday in Lent ~ March 13, 2022
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Introduction:

Jesus was saying and doing things that will get you killed. And still he was headed for Jerusalem. The city that kills any prophet who threatens the status quo. Anyone who rattles the powers that be. So for Jesus, trouble ahead, for sure. That is why some Pharisees came to warn him here in Luke 13:31. Yes, Pharisees. Luke helps us to see that not all Pharisees were bad. Not all Pharisees were enemies of Jesus. Some were open to him. Even sympathetic. Today's gospel text is a good example. I believe these unnamed Pharisees were looking out for Jesus. With good reason.

Herod was a killer, plain and simple. As Janet Wolfe says, "Herod was a stinker." How stinky? This Herod, Herod Antipas, comes from a family where murder "was a causal pastime," as Wilda Gafney, Hebrew biblical scholar and Episcopalian priest, put it. "His father, Herod the Great had murdered three of his sons, one of his wives and one of his mothers-in-law along with former friends and servants, and according to Matthew's Gospel, he tried to kill Jesus before he was out of the cradle."ⁱⁱⁱ Of course Jesus knew about Herod, who had just recently murdered John the Baptist, his cousin. And yet Jesus' responded to the Pharisees' warning saying basically, "Bring it on! Fox or no fox, I will keep on the path that God has set me on, no matter the cost."

Jesus did not have a security detail to protect him. He had something different. He had the 24/7, 365 days a year something, that began before the beginning of time and continues through eternity: the tender and fierce love of God. It came from deep inside and could not be taken from him. This tender and fierce Divine Love of God forged his identity and fueled his determination. Last week in the desert with the devil for forty days, we heard how Jesus stayed on task, on mission—no matter how clever the antics and arguments of his adversary.

We can't possibly know the mind of Christ. But, friends, here's the amazing thing: we do share his playbook. At least part of it. And we are about to open it now, as I read Psalm 27. Jesus knew the Psalms. Jesus prayed the Psalms. And so can we. This Psalm in particular is one that fortifies our courage and strength against any kind of enemy we may be facing: physical, emotional, or spiritual. This is one to keep in your pocket as you go into battle. Or face your Jerusalem. I believe it is a Psalm that is giving the people of Ukraine courage while they are literally under attack.

Closer to home, I know of at least two people here in our congregation, who have told me how Psalm 27 is a Psalm they have turned to again and again for courage and comfort. I invite you as I read it to let its verses seep into the crevasses of your spirit, to give you courage to face whatever you may be dealing with right now.

Sermon:

What kind of baby chickens are we? God wants to gather us under her wing. If we are willing. We can resist. God gives us that choice. And we know all too well what happens when we do. As Jesus warns in v. 35, "See, your house is left to you." At the same time, no matter what we choose, God will never let us go. No matter how often or how far we run. And God laments the hurt we put on ourselves and others. You can hear it in Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, you can hear it in the Psalmist's prayer: Whether we feel it or not, God is near. God is with us. Pulling us to the light. Calling us to trust in God's love to lead us through the darkest valley.

Perhaps you are familiar with the story of Mamie Till-Mobley. It was her son, Emmett Till, whose brutal lynching at age 14 in Mississippi, helped to spark the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century. It hinged on a seemingly small but courageous decision that Emmett's mom made. Mamie Till-Mobley decided the day she received her son's body, that at his funeral there must be an open casket. Even though they had already done some work on his body, the devastating damage was still shockingly evident. She said she needed witnesses to see what she had seen. People needed to know what they had done to her son, Emmett.

In an interview, she shared about an encounter with whom she believed to be the voice of God, telling her that God's son died that we might have life, but her son died so that we might decide what kind of people we want to be. She exposed white brutality and her Christian faith to the world. And she expressed a parallel meaning between her son's lynching and the crucifixion of Jesus. "Lord, you gave your son to remedy a condition," she cried out, "but who knows, but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching.

It took sixty-six years. Finally, this past week, the US Senate, after forty failed attempts, has unanimously passed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act, a bill to make lynching a federal hate crime. "Perpetrators of lynching got away with murder time and time again – in most cases, they were never even brought to trial ... at last this week, we did make progress against this historic and abhorrent injustice."ⁱⁱⁱ Mamie's courageous decision and prayer was answered. We can never bring back the 4,400 African Americans who were lynched in the US between the end of Reconstruction and the second world war, or the completely heal the untold damage to their families and to our body politic. We can thank the mother hen love of Emmett's mom, the fierce, unyielding and courageous decisions she made, for accomplishing this small victory over hate and evil. And we can commit being allies and advocates, guarding against the seeds of hate that the foxes among us will continue to try to cultivate.

It has been said that just as Jesus knew he could be executed when he went to Jerusalem, Martin Luther King Jr. knew that threats against his life could be realized in Memphis. Like the disciples rejecting the idea that Jesus' mission would mean suffering and death, most of King's organization vigorously opposed his journey to Memphis. But King, like Jesus, felt he had no choice: he had to go to Memphis and aid the garbage workers in their struggle for dignity, better wages, and a safer work place. He had to go because his faith demanded it.^{iv} Today, tomorrow, and the next day, I must be on my way. In other words, "Bring it on." I can Martin Luther King, Jr. saying.

This courage, born of deep faith, is something I see not only in Mamie Till-Mobley and Dr. King. I see this same kind of courage right here in this room, right here within our FPC community I believe we are people who are keeping on. People who say, in our Wisconsin way, "Bring it on!" Yes, profiles of faith and courage, here at FPC. You who keep on, through unexpected setbacks: whether we fall off a ladder; or if our bones get crushed in a car accident, or face the battle of cancer, one chemo treatment at a time, or face a life-altering diagnosis, with grace and even gratitude. I see you looking up and out, still being set high on a rock. I saw one of you determining, while temporarily confined to an undecorated room in a skilled nursing unit, to do what she could to make her CNA smile and laugh. Yes, you have prayed Psalm 27, my friends. You are willing.

Every person on earth is fighting a great battle of one kind or another. That is part of being human. Perhaps you are facing a particularly difficult struggle right now. Something you wish you could avoid, or find another way. But you know you are being called to face forward and continue on. To keep on, keeping on. The courage to do this comes from choosing to trust our mother hen Jesus, and not let the fear the dangerous and wily fox take over. Any power that is trying to stand in the way of God's way of love. The question, the invitation, the challenge I hear in this text for us today is this. Will we keep on moving toward the Jerusalems of our day, the centers of political power and corruption, fueled by the tender, yet fierce mother hen love of Christ?

Yes, she is tender and fierce. And she will not let us go. Nor will she let us get away with leaving the world as broken as we found it. It starts by saying "yes" to the kind of God that Jesus revealed to us. Even when that kind of God pushes us out of our comfort zones. That's what Jesus did and does. Do we have the courage?

As Wilda Gafney has taught me, "An unmarried Jewish man was a scandal and a man without children was pitiable. Jesus offers a masculinity and a divinity that is not patriarchal in this text. But some want no part of that kind of Jesus; nor any kind of Jesus who doesn't agree with what they agree with or hate who they hate. For some God as a man has become an idol, so much so that folk would rather be unmothered by God than embrace God or Christ as our mother. Yet God is so far beyond gender that in scripture God has a womb, birthed the sea and fathered the rain. The Bible teaches us: no one gender can contain God. God is transgressive, trans-gender, transcontinental, transnational, trans-religious. God's love transverses and encompasses all things."^v Are we willing to follow that God?

Be assured, to be under God's wing together, does *not* require us to believe the same things about God. Nor does God need (or want) us to argue or fight about who God is or isn't. Under the wing of our loving mother, we can explore new language and different images that can open the aperture of our hearts and our faith. Honestly, when was the last time you prayed to the mother hen Jesus? Give it a try and let me know how that goes. Notice what you see and feel. Our job is to be willing. Willing to bear witness, by loving as God loves. Yes, that is really hard to do, but God will lead us forward. God gives us the courage to do this.

You may have heard the late American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou's interview on Oprah's "Super Soul Sunday" series. When Oprah asked her about this vast power of God's love, she became tearfully emotional as she said to her, "It still humbles me, that this force—which made leaves and fleas and stars and rivers and you—loves me."^{vi} Friend, this force, so fierce and tender, this force which made leaves and fleas and stars and rivers, loves you. Therefore, of whom shall you be afraid?

Let us pray,

Teach me to be love, as You are Love;
Lead me through each fear;
Hold my hand as I walk through valleys of illusion each day,
That I may know your Peace.
I believe that I shall know the Realm of Heaven,
of Love, here on Earth!

Call upon the Beloved, be strong and trust
in the heart's courage.
Trust in the power of Love;
the Beloved's unconditional and everlasting love for you.^{vii}

ⁱ A Sanctified Art LLC/sanctifiedart.org. The source for this year's "Full to the Brim" Lenten theme.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.wilgafney.com/2016/02/21/christ-our-mother/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/08/us-senate-unanimously-passes-bill-to-make-lynching-a-federal-hate>

^{iv} James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2018), 90.

^v <http://www.wilgafney.com/2016/02/21/christ-our-mother/>

^{vi} Oprah's "Super Soul Sunday" series, Ep. 416.

^{vii} Nan C. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*, (Bloomsbury: London, England, 2007), Psalm 27, p.46.