

## Gathering God's People

*preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on March 17, 2019*

Luke 13:31-35

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' 32 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. 33 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." 34 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! 35 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." '

For the last forty years of the Presbyterian Church in Canada's history, one of the most frequently heard laments throughout our church has been our ever increasing inability to gather the flock of Christ together on a weekly basis and to effectively disciple those entrusted to our care. As a testimony to this fact, the Presbytery of Barrie hosted a special workshop this past fall with Stuart MacDonald, a professor at Knox College, who spoke about his new book, called, "Leaving Christianity." In the book, MacDonald and his co-author, Brian Clarke, meticulously document the decline that has transpired over the last fifty years, not just in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, but, in all Christian traditions, and the resulting loss of influence the church has experienced within the broader Canadian culture. In summarizing their findings, the book concludes with the following two sentences. "For good or ill, the place of Christianity in Canada has undergone a dramatic shift. We are now in a post Christian Canada."

In our gospel reading for today we hear a similar kind of story. As Jesus heads towards Jerusalem to go to the cross he laments over what has become of God's people. Speaking as the second person in the Trinity, Jesus recounts how he has poured out his Spirit throughout the centuries in an attempt to gather his people under his wing and it has not worked. In bitterness Jesus cries out at the apparent futility of all he has done as the Son of God. Where was the fruit? Where was the holy people he had set apart for himself? What was there to show for all the prophets he sent, all the mighty miracles that he performed, and the perfect Law that he had given them? After centuries of loving care what was there to show for all his efforts other than dead messengers, a scattered remnant and a holy city that

would be destroyed in a few short years?

In a similar way we may ask ourselves the same questions. Where is the fruit? Back in nineteen twenty five, one in four Canadians identified themselves as Presbyterian in the census data. Today, only eighty thousand people, out of a country of 37 million, (that means 0.2%) are on our church rolls. Where is the fruit? After all the ministry that has taken place through the years in Sunday worship, Sunday School, prayer meetings, committee meetings, choir meetings, and special events, where is the fruit? After all the money that has been raised for evangelism, social justice, and charity, what do we have to show for our efforts? Where is the fruit? Or, perhaps the more important question is, what is our hope for the future?

In response to this question let us turn to our gospel reading for today. While it is immersed in darkness, if we look carefully we will see the beginning of an emerging light that offers hope not only to the people of Jesus' time but to us today. However, in order to better see that light, let us first focus on the darkness.

As already mentioned, Jesus has begun his journey to Jerusalem to go to the cross. At the midway point in the journey we are told of this particular encounter that Jesus had with the Pharisees. While it seems at a first reading that they are concerned about his well being, as they warn him that Herod wants to take his life, chances are their concern is not genuine. Rather it is more likely that they are trying to use fear as a way of getting rid of Jesus before they move on to more aggressive measures.

However, Jesus is undeterred. As a result, he forcefully responds to the Pharisees' suggestion to flee by telling them he is not afraid of the threats of insignificant men. After all, as he reminds them in verse thirty two, he is in full command of the spiritual realm. Nature obeys his bidding. Compared to this authority, who is Herod? He is nothing but a lowly fox. Who are the Pharisees? They are not much more. In a similar way Jesus ridicules the Pharisees' suggestion that he should be fearful of death by reminding them that the reason that he is headed to the Holy City is to die.

Following this declaration Jesus makes his lament over Jerusalem and its completely corrupt nature. This corrupt nature is evidenced by the religious leadership, whom Jesus has called hypocrites and unmarked tombs, by the governing leadership, as evidenced by Jesus' reference to Herod as fox, and by his

description of the people whom he describes as insolent children who will not tolerate his mothering love and leadership. As a result of these actions by the state, the church, and the people, Jesus declares that they will reap the desolation that they have sown. This is the darkness that we find in our Scripture reading today. This is why, on a first read, it seems to be a story with next to no hope.

That being said, in the midst of these dark words that Jesus speaks, we find in the story recorded in Luke thirteen a bright light that offers great hope not only to the people of Jesus' day but to us as well. This hope comes not from the faithful response of God's people, but, from the faithful response of Jesus to will of God the Father.

Again, as we read in today's gospel reading, Jesus, in accordance to the Father's plan, served notice to the powers and principalities, namely the demons, that their time was coming to an end. By the miraculous healings Jesus performed, the world received a sign, like a budding branch, indicating that the curse that has plagued creation since the times of Adam and Eve was lifting. Through the way Jesus responded to the plans of the Pharisees and the threat of Herod, we are reminded that Jesus is the only true authority in all matters in heaven and on earth. So no matter how corrupt the world's political, religious, and economic systems become, they will not have the final say on anything. If evil and injustice prevails, it will only be for a brief time. And nothing anybody or everybody does can prevent this from coming true.

Also, through the example of Jesus' life as we encounter him in Luke thirteen, we can find light in the insight this passage gives us to address our own unique circumstances as individuals and as a church. In this regard, the first thing that comes to mind is that it is okay to grieve our losses and to express our frustration with our personal short comings and the systemic short comings we experience in the world around us. For just as Jesus lamented the lowly state of his chosen people, and the pain this broken relationship had on his heart, we too have permission to vocalize the pain we experience as participants in a broken world and a broken church.

However, in the midst of our suffering, we must never forget that God is good, God is in control, and God has a plan. This is the light that will allow us to walk through the darkest of days. For this is the light that allowed Jesus to confront the powers of evil and have no fear. This is the light that allowed Jesus to stand in front of his people, like a hen, and spread his wings and offer his chest to the fox

as his means of protecting his children. This is the light that allowed Jesus to offer himself in the ultimate self sacrifice, and know with confidence that he would rise on the third day victorious. This is the light that allowed Christ to take upon himself the full judgement of God and believe that the suffering he would endure would be worth it in the end. And this is the light that will allow us to remain hopeful in all circumstances, especially in those darkest of moments when it seems like all is lost.

Furthermore, this is the light that will awaken our conscience to God's counter cultural way of doing things; like conquering evil by assuming the nature of a mother hen rather than, say, a lion or a bear. This is the light that will make us embrace God's upside down approach to redemption where the last are first, the weak are strong, where the foolish confound the wise, and the poor become rich. This is the light that emerges from what seems like a dark story about Jesus being harassed by the Pharisees and Christ's subsequent condemnation of Jerusalem.

So, in light of this story, the next time we find ourselves getting discouraged by something that is going wrong in our lives, or in our family, or in our community, or in our church, let us not lose hope. The next time we get frustrated with ourselves or those around us let us not lose heart. For our salvation and the world's salvation does not lie in our own hands, but, in God's. It's God's story that matters. It is God story that we should focus on.

So as we continue our Lenten journey, let us free ourselves of the burden to make things happen in this world. Rather as we engage in this sacred season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving may we become more deeply aware of God's story in Scripture and God's story in our lives. May we become aware of the ways he is guiding history, just like he did in the gospels. May we have eyes that see his great salvation working in unexpected, counter cultural ways.

And as our eyes are opened may we find a renewed sense of hope and joy in all circumstances. May we be a people who have a story of good news to share with those around us. May we have a love and compassion that eases the burdens of those around us. May we be rooted in God's love for us and bear fruit that is worthy of love, all for the glory of God.