

Scripture Reading for March 13, 2022

Philippians 3:17-4:1 (NIV)

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. 4 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

Luke 13:10-17; 31-35 (NIV)

¹⁰ On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹ and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” ¹³ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

¹⁴ Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

¹⁵ The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶ Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”

¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

³¹ At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, “Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.”

³² He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ ³³ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!

³⁴ “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁵ Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Sermon: The Journey *and* the Destination

T. S. Eliot said, “The journey, not the destination matters,” and many others have said similar things. And that’s good advice for those who are particularly ambitious because the success they seek may well be hollow and disappoint. The pursuit of happiness is a fickle goal and joy is one of those surprising discoveries along the way. I would therefore caution those who are destination-focused to slow down and embrace the journey. Nevertheless I disagree with Eliot; the destination is not irrelevant. Wandering aimlessly through life is, I believe, unwise. When on a *pilgrimage*, the journey *is* important *and* so is the destination, both matter.

After the transfiguration, Luke writes that Jesus set out *resolutely* to go to Jerusalem.¹ In fact, just prior to his transfiguration, Jesus told his disciples “The Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be *rejected* by *all* the religious leaders and be *killed*, and on the third day be *raised*.”² Luke uses that strong word “must” 18 times in his Gospel to imply a divine *necessity* to fulfil God’s plan of salvation.³ Traditional Presbyterians who hold to predestination have no trouble with such a viewpoint, but those like me who believe in freewill get around this by saying that was Luke’s *own* view. Regardless, Jesus appears *determined* to go to Jerusalem, and I believe knew he would die there *not* because he knew the future, but because he knew the tradition that Jewish prophets were killed there. He anticipated that his verbal disputes with the pharisees in the townships would jump *up* a quantum level to a life-or-death clash amongst the temple elite in Jerusalem. It was a confrontation he fully expected because his kingdom of God message challenged the religious and political status quo.

We will come back to that later; as I said earlier, the *destination* is important but so is the *journey* and, in this context, I mean *what* Jesus accomplishes on the way. We heard one example in our Gospel reading when Jesus heals a woman in a synagogue on the Sabbath.⁴ We are told she had a “spirit of weakness” that resulted in her being bent over for 18 years and unable to stand up straight. On noticing her, Jesus stopped his teaching, called her over and said: “Madam, you are *released* from your ailment.”⁵ He then laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began *praising* God⁶ - and that’s surely the appropriate response. Luke makes it clear that God was the *source* of the healing, even as Jesus was the *agent* of healing.

However, the leader of the synagogue was upset because Jesus had healed a non-urgent medical case on the Sabbath. He could have waited until sun-down, when the Sabbath ended, and heal the woman then; but Jesus didn’t. He challenged his critics with an argument from the lesser to the greater. Since

¹ Luke 9:51, 53 NET.

² Luke 9:22, see also 9:44-46; 17:25; 18:31-34; 24:7-9; 24:46-47 – Luke’s six statements about the messiah’s suffering.

³ For example, see Luke 2:49; 4:43; 11:42; 12:12; 15:32; 24:7, 26, 44.

⁴ Luke 13:10-17; see also 6:6-11. (She was likely a well-known local woman for having such an orthopedic condition.)

⁵ Luke 13:12; “Woman” is a term of politeness *not* a derogatory term.

⁶ Luke 13:13. Notice there is *no* implied judgement on the woman for her ailment.

the woman has great dignity as a “daughter of Abraham,”⁷ shouldn’t they do *more* for her than they would do for an animal. So Jesus points out their double standards: “You’re happy to untie an animal that needs to get water on the Sabbath, how *much more then* should I *unbind* this woman who has been held captive by Satan.⁸ And what better day to do this than on the Sabbath!” Now this mention of Satan doesn’t necessarily mean that the woman was demon-possessed. Rather, that Luke understands bondage, however it’s caused, to be ultimately a work of the evil one and God’s kingdom is all about *releasing* people from whatever binds them and restoring their dignity by addressing their needs.⁹ The woman’s chronic physical condition was a reason for exclusion. Jesus makes her whole and, in the process, reconciles her to her community; no wonder God is praised, and the people are rejoicing! And that must be *our* reaction today when people who have been relegated to the margins of society or who have experienced discrimination are welcomed into the family of God and their dignity restored.

Nevertheless, this miracle story points to something bigger. What Jesus has done for this woman he longs to do for Israel as a whole. Satan, however, has had Israel in his power for many years.¹⁰ The heart of the kingdom-message is that Jesus the Messiah is the one who can set Israel free, but the religious leaders’ insistence on being *internally*-focussed, including the rigid application of the Sabbath law, is preventing that from happening. Will the nation’s leaders wake up to that fact before it’s too late? With that question on our minds, let’s transition back to the other part of our Gospel reading.

Certain pharisees were evidently sympathetic to Jesus¹¹ because some came to warn him to leave the region since Herod Antipas¹² was out to kill him. You will recall that Herod had John the Baptist killed earlier.¹³ Jesus’ responds: “Tell that fox, ‘Look, I am casting out demons and performing healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will complete my work.’”¹⁴ Referring to Herod as a fox shows the disdain Jesus has for him. A fox was regarded as sly, treacherous, and destructive, whereas Jesus came to bring *life* – to cast out demons and to heal. (We have just seen one example of that.) Nevertheless, the mention of the “third day” hints¹⁵ at his resurrection from the dead as being the *completion* of Christ’s saving work, of releasing the cosmos from Satan’s grip.¹⁶ Regardless of the Pharisees’ warning,

⁷ Notice that Zacchaeus was referred to as a “son of Abraham” in Luke 19:9.

⁸ See Luke 11:14-23. The story of the temptation of Jesus (Luke 4:1-13) also explains how he has *authority over* Satan.

⁹ See this miracle in the context of Jesus’ sermon at Nazareth; Luke 4:16-21.

¹⁰ Luke’s underlying point to his readers is that freedom from this bondage comes by responding positively to Jesus’ message, and without that there is no hope – as we will see later in Jesus’ lament.

¹¹ Scholars find this curious as Luke usually presents pharisees as antagonistic to Jesus. Some were at least hospitable (Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1) and there is no hint of impure motives in this situation. (See also Gamaliel in Acts 5:34-40.)

¹² Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great. The Romans did not allow him to use the title “king,” which annoyed him greatly, so indicating his subordinate status to Rome. Moreover, according to the Gospels, Jesus never entered the two cities associated with Herod, namely Sepphoris and Tiberias. These cities represented the antithesis of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. They were monuments that attempted to Romanize the people of Galilee.

¹³ See Luke 9:7-9.

¹⁴ Luke 13:32. (Note, “today and tomorrow” are not to be understood as just two literal days.)

¹⁵ In Luke 2:46 the boy Jesus was found on the third day in the temple. And to the risen Jesus he became alive again on the third day; see Luke 24:21.

¹⁶ This is certainly Luke’s perspective, regardless of what Jesus knew or thought at the time.

Jesus *must* go to Jerusalem *not* in order to escape death but to die there. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus has already told his disciples that the Son of man *must* suffer, something he repeats again, and his followers fail to understand.¹⁷ Jesus then says, “It’s impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem,”¹⁸ which is of course ridiculous because it *is* possible for a prophet to be killed *anywhere*! There are not many prophets that we know about who were actually killed in Jerusalem; Uriah was,¹⁹ and so was Zechariah.²⁰ John the Baptist wasn’t. Regardless, two things are evident: (a) Jesus saw himself as a prophet, and (b) Jesus was determined to complete his divine mandate, and he somehow knew that mission was to culminate in Jerusalem and that he would be killed there.²¹

Luke then presents one of two laments for Israel and Jerusalem.²² Recall the angels’ message to the shepherds was “good news that brings great *joy* for *all* people,”²³ and at this point Jesus mourns that people are not recognizing his news as good. Jesus grieves: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” First, there is a sense that Jesus the prophet speaks *for God* here. Not only is this Jesus yearning for Israel, it’s also *God’s* longing. Second, this beautiful image of a God as a mother-hen gathering her chicks under her wings speaks of shelter and care.²⁴ There’s vivid contrast here between a protecting hen and a predatory fox. Third, this lament is also a warning for God’s people to respond to Jesus’ kingdom message of peace while there’s still time. Israel cannot remain *passive* as it waits for God’s rescue because the kingdom of God has *already come upon them* in the life of Jesus the Messiah.²⁵ Jesus therefore laments the people’s failure to respond in large numbers. Like many of us, they didn’t enjoy hearing prophetic words. Like them, we resist the message, sometimes violently. Being politically astute though, Jesus fears for *their* future if they ignore God’s Messiah; let’s not disregard him today.

Unfortunately, the chicks pay no attention the mother-hen’s call. They don’t heed Christ’s warning and, as a result, have put *themselves* in danger. Remember, Luke’s Gospel was written *after* the temple had been destroyed and Jerusalem laid waste by the Romans in AD 70.²⁶ Jerusalem was supposed to be the city of God, but it no longer served that purpose. The sense you get here is that *if only* they had listened to Jesus and embraced his message things would have been different. As Jesus says earlier in Luke: “The one who rejects me rejects the One who sent me”²⁷ - and the consequences would be catastrophic.²⁸

¹⁷ See [2]. Luke’s point is that God will complete his purposes and Herod will not thwart them.

¹⁸ Luke 13:33. Jeremiah was whipped in Jerusalem (Jer 20:1-2) and later cast into a pit (Jer 38:6).

¹⁹ See Jer 26:20-23.

²⁰ See 2 Chron 24: 20-22, and there are legends that that also happened to Isaiah.

²¹ I don’t think Jesus had a death-wish; I’m sure Jesus would have preferred a different way if that was possible (Luke 22:42).

²² Luke 13:31-36; 19:41-44; cf. Matt 23:37-39. There are two warnings as well; Luke 21:20-24; 23:27-31; cf. Mark 13:14-23; Matt 24:15-28.

²³ Luke 2:10-11.

²⁴ See also Ruth 2:12; Ps 17:8; 36:7; 57:1.

²⁵ See Luke 10:9; 11:20. Since Jesus’ miracles and exorcisms demonstrate his power over Satan, in some sense the kingdom has come (or come near) – with the resurrection being the ultimate defeat of sin and death.

²⁶ As was Matthew’s and John’s Gospels, and Mark’s was probably written at the time of Jerusalem’s destruction.

²⁷ Luke 10:16; 19:44b. See also John 1:11; 1 Pet 2:4.

²⁸ In Luke’s mind the destruction of the temple was interpreted as divine judgement for rejecting Jesus the Messiah.

As I read this passage and consider the overall message of Jesus, I have to wonder whether Jesus also weeps at this moment in history. Conflict has long been present in our world. In terms of *percentages*, the number of people killed and displaced today is probably less than in earlier generations, but that *doesn't* make things better. In recent years, we've seen *millions* of Syrians displaced by war. Now, it's the Ukraine that is suffering. What's also mind-boggling is that this latest war, like many before it, has people supposedly of the same *faith* destroying each other. Religious nationalism is a bizarre killer! It also seems as if the void of nihilism has taken over the world; we appear intent on self-destructing. If it's not war, it's the climate that's changing - promising disaster. Moreover, democracy, human rights, and justice systems are all under severe threat. And in all these situations, greed and abuse of power is in play. Jesus grieves over it all because it's the antithesis of his kingdom-message.

But I also wonder if Jesus mourns the state of the church, especially the Western church. There are many complex social and historical factors for the church's present demise, particularly in traditional denominations – and they have all been well-studied. But I suspect two further critical issues are also involved. First, the church has *lost confidence* in her message. I suggest that in many cases, this process has occurred gradually over the last 200 years, and we are not aware of it. Many doubt the miracles of Jesus – like the one I discussed earlier - actually happened. And while many *hope* God raised Jesus from the dead, they aren't convinced. What's left are the stories and teachings of Jesus, and they can be brushed off as quaint or irrelevant. And this watering-down of the gospel opens the door for the second critical issue: the church has *distorted* Christ's message. There is the exclusivism of some Christians who seek to create barriers to those outside its walls from recognizing Jesus as the Savior of the *whole* World. This is equivalent of rigidly keeping the Sabbath law and failing to recognize the life-giving intent of the Sabbath. The irony is, as Jesus himself proclaimed, they lock *themselves* out with their barriers, rather than others! There are other Christians who link their faith to a political party or to a national flag and forget that Jesus rejected that specific temptation in the wilderness. Others distort the gospel into personal prosperity, some others reduce it to self-help. In both cases, "what's in it for *me*" replaces the wellbeing and wholeness of God's new inclusive *community*. I believe Jesus laments both the church's lost confidence and its distortion of his kingdom-message. He would gather us under his wing as a mother hen would do, but many seem unwilling to come to him. Let's all reflect seriously on this matter during this season of Lent.

After Jesus laments Israel's sorry state, he warns: "Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"²⁹ I suggest this statement has a double meaning in Luke's skillful hands. Recall that Ezekiel had a vision of the spirit of God leaving the temple at the time of the Babylonian exile³⁰ and there was no real sense of the divine spirit returning when it was rebuilt by Ezra and Nehemiah.³¹ Yes, the temple in Jesus' day was a *busy*

²⁹ Luke 13:35. On the judgement/warning see Jer 17:12; 22:5; on the "Blessed. . ." quote see Ps 118:26.

³⁰ See Ezek 10-11.

³¹ See Ezra 6:13-18.

place, but God's presence was absent. Luke makes it clear that Jesus himself *is* the very presence of God.³² And on Palm Sunday, Jesus will enter Jerusalem on a donkey and visit the temple. Christ's presence signifies the divine Spirit *returning* to the temple as Jesus seeks to reform its spiritual disciplines. Alas, we know what happened later on Good Friday. The Western church today also needs to remember *activity* is not necessarily proof of spiritual life. Rather life is where the Holy Spirit is present in the world bringing about God's kingdom values and opposing the works of the evil one.

The second meaning was for Luke's readers because, as I said before, at that *time* the temple and Jerusalem *were* physically desolate. For them – and for us – we will not see Jesus again until he returns, at which point we can proclaim: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"! The current state of the world and of the church is not, then, the final word because God's love and grace is far greater than we can ever imagine. Yet if we're not intentional, we may still do great damage unless we listen to the voice of Jesus and change our ways. And that's a feature of Lent, isn't it? So, let us continue the *journey*, heeding the call of God the mother-hen so that we might come back to God and take refuge. Then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can follow Jesus on to our *destination*, confidently facing whatever comes our way. Amen. Let us pray.

³² See [25].