

Pastor Kenneth Mars  
 St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY  
 Second Sunday in Lent  
 February 28, 2010  
 Text: Luke 13:31–35

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Gospel reading for today from Luke 13:31–35 recounts a bittersweet moment in the life of our Lord Jesus. He's on the way to Jerusalem. His time walking on this earth is almost finished. The cross and resurrection are not many days away. And the evil forces are working desperately to keep Jesus from fulfilling His divine mission. If they can just keep Jesus away from the cross, sin, death, and the devil would win.

Sadly, the Pharisees, that religiously conservative group of men whom Jesus was always debating, become pawns used by Satan, the old evil foe. Jesus and the Pharisees would appear to have much in common. But they were bitter rivals. That fact must be kept in mind in order to understand what's happening in today's gospel reading. Let me read for you Luke 11:39–44 in order to show you just how intense this relationship had become. These are the words of Jesus spoken publicly to and about the Pharisee:

Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools!...[W]oe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.

As you can see, Jesus pulls off the gloves with the Pharisees. Our Lord's can't tolerate self-righteous people who keep people from hearing and receiving God's grace and forgiveness. Greedy fools without the life of God in their hearts and minds. That's what the Pharisees are to Jesus.

In their debates with Jesus, the Pharisees are losing their reputation and prestige before the people. So, it's time to try something different. Theological debates aren't working; maybe a political threat will work. So, they come to Jesus. "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you" (vs. 31). The Pharisees are talking about Herod Antipas the son of Herod the Great, the same ruler who tried to kill Jesus when he was an infant.

Jesus is undeterred. "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course'" (vs. 32). Jesus has a course to complete and the Pharisees aren't going to keep Him from it with mere empty threats.

Jesus knows why He was sent by God the Father: to live, die a bloody death, and rise victorious on the third day so that this corrupted creation can be set free from the bondage of sin, death and the devil. That's the course He must finish.

Last week's gospel reading from Luke 4 recounted the various temptations the devil hurled at Jesus while He was fasting in the wilderness. The devil's strategy was to get Jesus to abandon His divinely appointed course of bitter suffers, death, and resurrection. Think of it in terms of the Olympics, which conclude today. When an athlete strays from the course, he's disqualified. If Jesus doesn't finish the course that leads to Calvary's hill, He will be disqualified. And the devil wins the "gold" in a manner of speaking. In the desert temptations, the devil tries to divert Jesus from His course. He's doing the same thing in today's reading, only he's using the Pharisees to do it.

The Pharisee's trap is sinister and devilish. If Jesus were to heed their warning He would be a false prophet. When a prophet or for that matter, a pastor is sent by God to perform His sacred will and speak His holy words and he refuses to do so because of the suffering it may cause, that person becomes a false prophet, a false preacher.

But Jesus knows His course. "Nevertheless," Jesus says, "I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem" (vs. 33). Jerusalem is where He must go for there He must die like the other faithful prophets of old. Jerusalem had a reputation of rejecting God's prophets and teachers. It would prove true once again.

Jeremiah, the prophet in our Old Testament reading, knew what it was like to be rejected for preaching God's Word. The Lord sent him to preach judgment, Jerusalem will be destroyed, and grace, there is yet time for repentance. The religious and political leaders declared that Jeremiah "deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city" (Jer. 26:11).

I'm sure Jeremiah didn't like being beaten and arrested for obeying God's Word. But hear his words of confidence and faith, "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God...but as for me, behold, I am in your hands...Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants" (Jer. 26:12-15). Jeremiah is telling them that killing the prophetic messenger doesn't change the truth of the message.

Jesus knows Israel's sad history of rejecting God's love and salvation, and it saddens Him deeply. You can hear it in our Lord's words, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (vs. 34). The holy city of God, and yet the unholy city of unbelief. Amazing, isn't it, how the godly and the ungodly can be so close together. It's true of the Church today. Faith and unbelief lie close beside one another, often within the same heart. "Lord I believe! Help my

unbelief!” cried a desperate father in Mark 9:24. Faith and unbelief in the same heart!!

Jesus weeps and groans over our unbelief. Our Lord says, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (vs. 34). It’s such a tender and yet tragic picture – a mother hen clucking after her little ones, trying to gather them under her protective wings out of harm’s way, willing to sacrifice herself to save them, and yet they stubbornly refuse. That’s Jesus love for Jerusalem, for His Church, for you and me. He longs to gather us under His extended arms. His will is that you be sheltered under the protection of His merciful grace. He’s willing to go to Jerusalem and die for you, for all, even for those who hate Him and who wish Him dead.

Jesus wants us under His protective care. There are no lone rangers in God’s kingdom. No rugged individualists or self-made Christians. Just a brood of helpless hatchlings, baby birds hidden under our Savior’s protective wing. He calls us again and again to duck under His wing, to find shelter and safety under his outstretched arms.

Jesus finished His course. He won!! That’s the heart and soul of the Biblical gospel. The devil couldn’t divert our Lord Jesus. Instead, he tries to divert us from receiving Christ’s gospel. His preference is to have you distracted rather than hear the Gospel and be forgiven. He would use anything to distract you from your course of faith: the shortcomings of the pastor, the local congregation and her members, or on the failure and sins of the Church as a whole.

The devil is thrilled when congregations dismiss their pastors for calling sin “sin” and it affects attendance and the bottom line, for urging people to the Sacrament, for calling them to repentance and faith. And if he can’t stop us from receiving God’s grace and mercy in Church, then he just might keep us from forgiving and loving one another in our homes and relationships. Eventually, the effect will be the same – hardened hearts that reject reconciliation with both God and man.

Oh, how the devil delights when people reject or ignore God’s grace, forgiveness, love, and Spirit given through His Word and Sacraments!

But we are not ignorant of his ways, as St. Paul says in II Corinthians 2:11. Christ extends His arms of grace around us in our baptism, every time we hear that our sins are forgiven, and when we receive His holy body and blood. Jesus promises each of us that He is with us “unto the end of the ages” (Matthew 28:20).

Our Lord Christ has covered you with His atoning death and resurrection life. That’s His course. He finished it. He won the “gold.” You can leave this place day in the peace and joy of Jesus under whose ever-abiding shadow you live.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.