

Sermon for 2019 Yr C Lent 2
Preached Sunday 3/17/2019 at St. James', Mount Vernon
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Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

Usually we think of the Pharisees as opposed to Jesus, threatened by his teachings and trying to trick him and trap him.

But the real story of the Pharisees is more complex. Their teachings about God's love, justice, and mercy were pretty similar to those of Jesus. They had more in common with Jesus than scripture tends to let on. Today our scripture tells us of a situation where the Pharisees show concern for his life and warn him of Herod's plans.

And yet, their concern for Jesus is also their desire to avoid the demands that Jesus makes, to follow God faithfully. The Pharisees, like the other Jewish leaders, live in fear of the Roman occupiers of Israel; they don't want to rock the boat, they don't want to see their place in society threatened or challenged. They turn away from God to follow their human needs.

For this reason, Jesus laments, speaking with the voice of God: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing."

Jesus remembers the covenant that God made with Abraham, a covenant to bless his descendants with a sweet land, a fertile, prosperous home, a land of milk and honey. A covenant that God took upon himself, and that God desired to keep, but that his chosen people kept shrinking from, resisting and refusing to live in the land of God's blessing.

This is what Jesus sees in the Pharisees: their reluctance to live in the confidence and security of God. Instead they try to manage things to work out the way they want them to, relying on their own devices rather than following God. The Pharisees remind me of Peter, when he rebuked Jesus for teaching that he would have to go up to Jerusalem and die there. "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus said then to Peter. He is far gentler with the Pharisees, but the message is the same... they have their minds set not on divine things but on human things.

The apostle Paul, a Pharisee himself, invites us to imitate him as a follower of Christ. Paul knows something about what it is to live as an enemy of the cross, for he himself was the number-one persecutor of the followers of Jesus. He is speaking of himself, when he describes those whose "end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." And yet, Paul has become the number-one example of how to follow the Gospel, with single-minded commitment, without regard to the cost. Paul must have seemed a fool to his Pharisee brothers, he must have suffered scorn and humiliation from the very people he once

stood proudly among. But Paul has his mind set on divine things, not human things, and he doesn't let the human distract him from acting on his faith.

To follow Jesus involves extending ourselves, reaching outside of our comfort zone and social boundaries to notice the needs and concerns of others, to respond to injustice and oppression with justice and mercy. This is hard, when I try to do it myself. I have so many reasons to turn away, to not get involved. I don't want to intrude, or do something inappropriate, or get myself into an awkward situation, I don't want to risk looking foolish. But when I take myself out of my self-concern, when I remember that, through baptism it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, then I discover that I am able to connect and to act, to speak up, to put myself on the line for the sake of others. And I discover the joy of following divine things instead of human things.

Be not like the Pharisees, shrinking from the responsibilities of our faith in the world, from being living witnesses to the truth of our God. Jesus has given us his spirit, so that we might act in his name. Jesus has given us his spirit, so that others might greet us with the same welcome, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Amen.