

Unexpected Temptation
Luke 13:31-35
February 21, 2016

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, 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.' O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' "

In last week's message, we heard about how Satan attacked Jesus in the wilderness during his weakness of hunger and thirst. We also heard about how Satan will always come after us in our weak moments. However, today's text shows us how Satan will also tempt us in moments of strength. That sounds rather odd, doesn't it? Why would Satan attack us and try to take advantage of us in our moments of strength?

Let's look at the context of today's reading. Jesus had been doing some powerful preaching. He had just healed a woman with a spinal disability. The crowds were amazed. They stood listening intently to Jesus. All these things were pointing to the fact that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Now, some Pharisees enter the scene. Normally, when we hear the word Pharisee, we form an immediate mental picture of a villain. We fall into autopilot and think, "Watch out. These are the bad guys." But consider what they had to say, "You'd better get out of here. Herod wants to kill you."

That doesn't sound like people who are opposed to Jesus, or hate Jesus. The fact is, this warning could be read in two different ways, and depending on how you read these words, you can come to two very different conclusions.

This warning could have come from a genuine concern for Jesus' safety. Remember, not all Pharisees were the bad guys. Joseph of Arimathea, a Pharisee, was the one who went to Pilate asking for the body of Jesus after the crucifixion. Joseph even had Jesus buried in his own tomb.

Nicodemus was also a Pharisee. He once had a midnight talk with Jesus about the concept of being born again. And, in the book of Acts, we learn that some of Jesus' earliest followers were Pharisees.

Saul, who later became Paul, was a rising star among the Pharisees. Although Paul's persecution of the early Christians wasn't a ringing endorsement of the Pharisees, after his conversion, Paul was largely responsible for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. So, we could see this warning from these Pharisees as given with all good intentions, as an effort to save Jesus' life. "Get out of here. If Herod finds you, he's going to kill you."

On the other hand, you could view this warning as an effort on the Pharisees' part to deter Jesus from his intended path and lead him into an area where he could be more easily controlled. This could be seen as an effort to keep Jesus from going to Jerusalem.

However, the reason for the warning isn't what we are concerned with today. There is something far more subtle going on here. Jesus knew how Herod operated. He didn't need to be told Herod was dangerous. Jesus knew the whole Herod family was dangerous.

It was this Herod's father, another Herod, who called for the murder of the boy babies in Bethlehem, in an effort to kill baby Jesus. It was the current Herod, who was married to his brother's wife, and who killed John the Baptist to please his ill-gotten brother's wife.

Jesus knew full well what a blood-thirsty, tyrant Herod could be. Historically, we also know that this Herod had two of his sons murdered because he thought they were a threat to his reign. So, Jesus knew Herod had no qualms about murdering the innocent.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is very interesting: *Go and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, 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* (Lk 13:32-33 ESV).

These aren't the words of someone who's in fear of Herod's power. These are the words of someone who is well aware of his own power. These are words strewn with self-confidence. These are the words of someone who has a mission and will not let anyone or anything get between him and his mission.

Now we have come to a very important point. The interaction between Jesus and these Pharisees, and indirectly the interaction between Jesus and Herod, contains a very subtle temptation delivered at a moment of great power for Jesus.

This is nothing like the temptation Jesus faced in last week's Gospel reading. Jesus is not in a weakened condition. In fact, Jesus is approaching the height of his power in his ministry. Large crowds are following him. His popularity was growing more and more. So, it's reasonable to think that Herod could see Jesus as a threat; much like the feeling he had toward his sons he had murdered.

Herein lies the source of Satan's temptation. He comes to Jesus, not directly as he did in the wilderness, but he comes through the voice of the Pharisees. He comes sounding like a friend, not an enemy. "Get out of here. You're in danger. Abandon this ministry. Run to safety. If you continue on this path, you'll end up dead."

Jesus was not about to be pushed off his chosen path, and he knew where that path was leading. Earlier in the 9th chapter of Luke, we are told that Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem. We will follow along that path on our Lenten journey.

Jesus was single-minded here. He was going to Jerusalem. He was going there to die. That's the power in today's Gospel reading. Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die for our sins. He's going to Jerusalem for our salvation. That's the reason for this subtle temptation.

"Get out of here. Herod wants to kill you." Even if the Pharisees' hearts were in the right place, Satan was in control of their minds. The last thing Satan wanted was for Jesus to continue on to Jerusalem. The last thing Satan wanted was for Jesus to follow his Father's plan.

Satan couldn't defeat Jesus when Jesus was weak. So now he tries to outwit Jesus when Jesus is in a moment of strength. This time Satan tries a much different strategy. "You're doing so much good. You're successful. You have all these people following you. But you're not safe. If Herod gets hold of you all of this will come to an end. Herod could ruin your ministry." Satan was sowing seeds of doubt.

Now let's step up to today. Many people think that pastors have it easy. They think pastors have some special "in" with God, or some special faith that protects them from the temptations of Satan. But, I'm here to tell you, pastors suffer temptations far greater than most people. The longer they are in ministry the more severe the temptations get. The harder they work for God the harder Satan attacks.

How about you? Do you think you're safe because you're sitting here in church? Do you think you're better capable of resisting Satan because you're in worship today? You must realize that being here can subject you to even greater temptations. Satan wants you out of here, so he's going to use everything he has. Let me give you an example.

In C. S. Lewis' book "The Screwtape Letters" there is one scene covering those in worship. Screwtape is one of Satan's lieutenants. Wormwood, Screwtape's nephew, is on his first assignment on earth. Wormwood writes his uncle telling him the person he is assigned to tempt won't stop going to church. Screwtape answers, "If your subject insists on going to church, don't try to stop her. Instead, while she's sitting in church, be sure she notices that woman she is angry at. While she's trying to worship, fill her mind with thoughts of revenge and how much she hates that woman." How safe to you feel now?

Satan is always going to be tempting you to not live out your faith. He will tempt you every day of your life, and probably even more so on Sunday. If Satan can keep you from worshiping God, if Satan can keep you from fruitful communion with your brothers and sisters in the faith, then Satan has won the battle.

But all is not lost. There is one weapon in your arsenal that Satan cannot defeat – *you aren't in this alone*. God is with you every minute of the day – every step of way. God

knows how hard it is to stand against Satan. He knows because Jesus, in his humanity, had to make that stand.

Jesus experienced the full power of Satan's temptation, and he Jesus won. Jesus defeated Satan and he set his face toward Jerusalem. He never strayed from the path set out by his Father. He went to Jerusalem. He died for our sins. And, by the grace of God, we are forgiven.

When you face Satan and his temptations, as you will every day of your life, know that you are not alone. Know that Jesus walks beside you. Know that Jesus will give you the strength to stand your ground. Remember Jesus' promise: *I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Mt 28:20 ESV).