

Readings: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Grace and peace to you from that God who yearns to gather us like a hen gathers her brood under her wings. Amen.

On most days, it is probably the best part of my day. Just before I tuck him in and kiss him goodnight, our two-year-old Elijah picks a couple books off the shelves and crawls his way into my lap and we read books. Whether it's *Goodnight Moon* or *Where the Wild Things Are*, whether he chooses a book we've read twelve times or one we've never read, whether I've had a great day or a "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day" (not that I ever have those); reading with Elijah's become a daily discipline for both of us – a way to disentangle ourselves from the daytime before we close our eyes for the night.

I share this, in part, because of what happened the other night. Elijah picked a book off the shelf that I couldn't recall ever seeing before. Like many children's books, it was brief: 8 pages, 36 words, 5 sentences. The title, "Jesus is My Friend," kind of says it all, but since it's so short, I'll read it to you:

The Bible tells me about Jesus. Jesus is the baby / born in a warm place for animals. Jesus is the boy / growing and learning about God. Jesus is the man / loving the children. Jesus is my friend.

Not a bad book for children, right? Well, I didn't find it on the back, but you can almost imagine a little box in the corner on the back cover (like every toy seems to be labeled with these days) that says something like: "Suitable for ages 0-3."

I was thinking about this depiction of Jesus as I toyed with the Gospel reading this week, because of how different the Jesus of Luke 13 is. And I started to imagine a little warning that might come with the storybook version of Luke 13:31-35: "*Warning! Suitable only for the most mature followers of Jesus.*"

There's nothing wrong with the book, "Jesus is My Friend" or its depiction of children frolicking around him, just about to leap into his lap. But let's be real, this is not the biblical witness we have before us today.

“[You can] Go and tell that fox [Herod], ‘Listen, I’m casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is *impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.*”

I don’t know about you, but these aren’t the kind of words I’d like to hear if I’m a kid sitting on the lap of Jesus. This Jesus who says his work is the work of a *prophet*.

We talk often of Jesus as “Lord,” Jesus as “Savior,” Jesus as “Son of God.” Not to mention Jesus as our “friend” or as the one who (in the garden) “walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own.”

But what of this Jesus as *prophet*? How often do we hear or think about that Jesus? And now into the second week of Lent, we might ask ourselves how open or willing are we to make room in our hearts and our lives for this depiction of Jesus?

Well, first we might ask what a prophet does...

A firefighter fights fires, right? A teacher teaches. A retired person puts new tires on cars (*just seeing if you’re awake...*), but what does a *prophet* do?

The popular portrayal of a prophet is a “future-teller.” But as one author who’s spent a lifetime studying the Old Testament prophets and prophets in general writes, “While the prophets are in a way future-tellers, they are concerned with the future as it impinges upon the present.”¹

This author (whose books, I’ll say, should probably contain their own warning labels) suggests that the main “*task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.*”² I warned you, his writings should have a label that says, “Ages 18 and up.”

But, put another way... A prophet cuts to the heart of the matter. A prophet critiques. A prophet offers a counter-culture. A prophet provides a set of eyeglasses that shows, that reveals a new way of seeing and living.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 1978 by Fortress Press, p. 12.

² Brueggemann, p. 13.

So what is the new way of seeing and living Jesus provides as a prophet in our reading today?

Well, Herod (*that fox*) is the culture that Jesus is countering. And there wasn't just one "Herod," there were actually quite a few Herods, a whole family, in fact. The Herod of Jesus' day was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. When the elder Herod died, the kingdom was divided up into four parts and Antipas didn't get the title king, but was called a "tetrarch," he ruled one of four quarters. And you might imagine, as one of four tetrarchs, Herod Antipas constantly schemed and plotted to hold on to the power and affluence he'd accumulated.

But, as holding on to power and affluence always is, it was a tightrope walk. Because he had to please (or at least not significantly displease) on the one hand the Roman Empire and Emperor (at whose pleasure he served) and on the other hand the Galileans, the people whose region he ruled over, we could say he *oppressed to maintain his affluence*.

So you can understand why Herod would fear Jesus and why he would want to kill anyone working as a prophet. Prophets are critics. But anyone trained and educated in the ways of the Roman Empire know well how to silence criticism. As the author I mentioned earlier puts it, you use one of two methods: you either use "heavy-handed prohibition...backed by forceful sanction" or you "develop a natural immunity and remain totally impervious."³

Simply put, you either kill it or you get a thick enough skin and hard enough heart so you're numb to it. How do you do, what do you do with criticism? What do you do, how do you do with "other-ness"?

Herod has enough power to kill Jesus. The Pharisees didn't quite have the same kind of power, but they know enough to know Jesus is stirring up trouble and they don't want him around, because prophetic trouble stirs up trouble for everyone. "Get away from here," they said.

Far from having the best interests of Jesus in mind, the Pharisees probably know somewhere in their hearts (as we too might suspect) that the prophetic work of Jesus is like a river on a stone. It has the potential to wear away the hardness of a heart and show it a new way of living. And that's something from which you never recover.

³ Brueggemann, p. 37-38.

It's a whole different way of looking at the cross. Jesus says it's the work that he's doing – the work of a prophet – that leads to him being killed. Being crucified isn't the main goal, it isn't somehow required by God. It isn't the end in itself.

Offering a prophetic counter-culture, providing a set of eyeglasses that shows, that reveals a new way of seeing and living, cutting to the heart of the matter. Now. In the present. That's the point.

But being hung on the cross is the consequence and Jesus knows this. Because crucifixion is the tool of the dominant culture to avoid criticism. It's what is done to avoid pain, to avoid letting anything in that endangers its power or that might change it. It destroys the thing that threatens it.

And there's the rub. Being a follower of Jesus means living a life where the salty words of the prophet get into the regions of your heart where the Herods rule and the Pharisees tell you to flee. Following Jesus means being strong enough (maybe it would be better to say, *being weak enough*) to lay open on the cross your own wounds, your own vulnerability, your own brokenness. What that means... how you do it... that's your task for this second week in Lent.

But beware, it is a counter-cultural way of living, this daily-dying-to-self-and-world. It's a counter-cultural way of seeing, the kind of vision which the dominant culture will dismiss simply as blindness. It's a counter-cultural way of feeling, this being open to pain, to suffering, to hurt, to passion.

You wouldn't know it if you're trained and incorporated in the dominant culture (as all have been), but being open to pain, suffering, hurt, passion might be our greatest gift from God. It also might be the only way we grow in faith.

But to those who *are open to it*, Jesus says this way of living and growing, seeing and feeling is as natural as a mother hen who works to gather and protect her brood under a pair of holy wings.

This might sound like good material for a children's book, but we're talking about radical love. Sacrificial love, grounded in prophetic ministry. And be warned – the way of the cross, the road to Jerusalem is indeed *suitable only for the most mature followers of Jesus*.

Amen.