

“Proceed at Your Own Risk”

“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.”

Whenever we want to go to the Rotary Complex, we have two choices: either take the long way through Churchill Circle and several winding streets, or the short cut through the new development at the end of Forman Avenue. But as you approach this neighbourhood, there is a sign warning drivers that this is a “private road: proceed at your own risk.” I’ve never found anything dangerous about this route, but I assume that this is an insurance regulation that protects the developers against lawsuits if someone has an accident on these streets. It will probably be taken down once the development is completed, but at the moment I always feel a little sense of danger whenever I take this route to the complex.

While these local roads may not be very dangerous to travel, there are times when we need to heed signs warning us of the risks that are ahead and urging us to reconsider continuing down this route. We may find ourselves going into areas that might damage our vehicle, or place us in a precarious situation, or put us into a circumstance that may even be life threatening. Ignoring a warning sign in such a situation can be hazardous, and at times even lethal.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus comes upon such warnings as he is on his journey to Jerusalem. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem begins in 9:51: *“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”* Throughout the next ten chapters, Jesus continues on this journey, even as he encounters various people and offers many teachings along the way. The journey will conclude when he reaches his destination on Palm Sunday and is greeted by his disciples who shout *“blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”* (19:38). Jesus journeys to Jerusalem fully aware of what awaits him when he reaches his destination; he tells his disciples on numerous occasions that *“the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* (9:22); but nothing deters Jesus from continuing on his journey to the city where God’s Will through him will be accomplished.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Jesus is undeterred when the Pharisees warn him to *“get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”* (13:31). Herod Antipas, son of the murderous Herod the Great who was responsible for the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem in Matthew 2:16-18, was notorious in his own right for his execution of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29), so the Pharisees’ warning to Jesus is not without merit. But in his response, Jesus declares that he will not die out of season as another of Herod’s victims, but will finish his divinely appointed mission in Jerusalem: *“Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’”* (13:32). Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ warning about Herod by asserting that he has nothing to fear from the king (who he will encounter after his arrest in Luke 23:6-12). Herod – who Jesus characterizes as “that fox,” a metaphor that paints Herod as sly, cunning, and voraciously destructive – will not hinder Jesus from continuing his work. Jesus will continue to cast out demons and heal the sick, public acts that demonstrate the power of the Kingdom of God. The continuation of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is of necessity; for *“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.”* (13:33). Jesus is not traveling to Jerusalem to escape death, but in order to die there. Jesus’ declarations of this necessity sketch a profile of God’s redemptive purposes that will be accomplished when Jesus reaches his destination:

- “Why are you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” – 2:49.
- “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.” – 4:43.
- “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” – 9:22.
- “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” – 19:5.
- “For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.” – 22:37.

Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and his death there *“will be controlled by his faithfulness to God’s redemptive purposes, not by Herod.”* (Alan Culpepper).

Jesus further confirms the necessity of completing his journey to Jerusalem *“because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”* (13:33). Among the prophets killed in Jerusalem were Uriah (Jeremiah 26:20-23), Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:20-22), those killed by Manasseh (2 Kings 21:16, 24:4) and according to tradition Isaiah. Prior to his own martyrdom, Stephen refers to this legacy of prophets being put to death in the Holy City: *“Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.”* (Acts 7:52). It is the will of God that the completion of Jesus’ ministry take place in Jerusalem. For Luke especially, Jerusalem plays a central role; the evangelist refers to the city ninety times in Luke and Acts (in the rest of the New Testament, Jerusalem is mentioned only 49 times).

Even as Jerusalem is the inevitable destination toward which Jesus must journey, it is also the subject of his lament over the city *“that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”* (13:34). The metaphor of Jerusalem as a mother and her inhabitants – or all Israel – as children is rooted in the Old Testament (*“All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the prosperity of your children.”* – Isaiah 54:13). The image of a bird mothering her young (*“how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”*) is also common in the Hebrew Scriptures: *“As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the LORD alone guided him; no foreign god was with him.”* (Deuteronomy 32:11-12). Jesus laments over Jerusalem as the one who has repeatedly offered Israel, God’s people, his motherly love and protection, but mourns because they would not receive him: *“He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him”* (John 1:11). The result, Jesus laments, is that *“your house is left to you”* (*“this house shall become a desolation”* – Jeremiah 22:5). Jerusalem would be destroyed in 70 CE, and by the time Luke wrote its destruction would have fulfilled Jesus’ words.

Jesus concludes his lament by quoting from one of the processional psalms that was sung by pilgrims entering Jerusalem: *“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”* (Psalm 118:26). In proclaiming that *“you will not see me until the times comes when you say”* these words, Jesus looks ahead to his coming as the Son of Man at the end time, *“who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets”* (Acts 3:21). The chant serve to remind readers *“of who Jesus is and points ahead to Jesus’ return as the Son of Man”* (Culpepper), and are the words exclaimed by the multitude of disciples who welcome Jesus on Palm Sunday (19:38) – a welcome that is not shared by all in the city of Jerusalem on that first day of Holy Week.

While Jesus was fully aware of the risks that he would face when he reached his destination in Jerusalem, he did not allow the threats they posed to deter him from completing his journey. For those who would accept his invitation to discipleship, Jesus would warn them that they would also face the same dangers that he would face if they chose to walk with him. An invitation to discipleship carries with it inherent risks; one must take serious the warning signs and *“proceed at your own risk”* if one desires to follow Jesus.

- “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” – Luke 9:23-24.
- “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” – Luke 14:26-27.
- “You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” – Luke 21:16-19.

There are risks that are inherent with being a disciple of Christ, and if one accepts the call to follow Jesus one proceeds in the knowledge that the risks that Jesus encountered might also be encountered by us. But proceeding down this risk-filled path is not necessarily a ticket to martyrdom, because even though there might be dangers and uncertainty lurking ahead of us, we so forth in confidence that our Lord will accompany us on every step of the journey that may lead us to the places that Jesus endured but ultimately leads us to the triumph of the resurrection and the promise of eternal life in the one who journeyed to Jerusalem so that he might be our Lord and Saviour. Paul speaks of both the risks and rewards of discipleship in his letter to the Philippians, recounting the losses he endured which paled in comparison to what he gained in following Christ.

- “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” – Philippians 3:7-11.

As we look to our future as the church – both here in Stratford, across Canada, and throughout the world – there are many signs warning us to proceed at our own risk, and the temptation is great not to go forward down this perilous path that lies before us. Many churches choose to play it safe, turning in on themselves and their own survival lest they take the risk of going forward and losing everything. In a sermon preached at the graduation ceremony at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1989 (two years after I graduated from this school), Fred Craddock spoke of “The Last Temptation of the Church” being one of not risking the journey to follow Jesus and instead staying behind for the sake of its own survival.

- “We can make it. We can cut back on the budget a little bit. We may have to take some of the money out of outreach and put it in a savings account, in case we get a little low. I know we’ll have to cut back on staff, we’ll have to reduce our program. But we can survive.”

All of us have faced this temptation to do whatever it takes so that our churches can survive – indeed, survival is one of the most primal of human instincts. But Jesus did not call his disciples to survive; he called them to follow him in a journey that would be fraught with peril and would lead to his death on the cross. In fact, before the followers of Jesus were called “Christians” they were referred to as People of the Way (*“Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”* – Acts 9:1-2). Jesus calls us to follow him in the path of discipleship even when the signs point out the dangers ahead of us, because we go forth in the knowledge that Christ promised to be with us always, *“even to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20). We go forth in confidence, knowing that even though there may be trials and tribulations ahead of us, even if we might have to sacrifice

much of what we have today, what is awaiting us is a treasure that is far greater than anything we could amass for ourselves.

- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this your rejoice, even if for now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” – 1 Peter 1:3-7.

I'm not terribly worried about any dangers that may lurk on the short cut to the Rotary Complex (aside from the stray nail that may find its way into one of my tires), but I must admit that there are situations in which I do heed the warning signs that caution me to proceed at my own risk. As a driver, it's wise to heed such cautionary signs; but as a church, our call is not to be risk-averse, or cautious, or concerned primarily for our own survival. Our call is to be the Church of Jesus Christ that continues to be the people of the Way, following Jesus in the way of discipleship, willing to risk everything for the immeasurable blessings that await us when we reach the end of our journey when, like St. Paul, we have finished our race and kept the faith so that *“from now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearance.”* (2 Timothy 4:8).

- “Take up your cross, and go the thorn way; and if a sponge of vinegar be passed you on a spear, take that too. Souls are made of endurance. God knows.” – Carl Sandberg.

In his most famous hymn, Martin Luther (whose death we remembered on February 18) wrote that *“God's Word forever shall abide, not thanks to foes, who fear it; for God himself fights by our side, with weapons of the Spirit. Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, through life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom's ours forever!”* What we have today may not survive – risks by their very nature involve the possibility of loss – but no matter what dangers await us on the Way, God's Church goes forth boldly in the Spirit and in the grace of God that has brought us safe thus far – and the grace that will lead us home. Amen.