

"Hello, I Must Be Going"

"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."

During our first winter in Stratford, I was driving to Canadian Tire when I noticed a line of transport trucks parked along the side of Ontario Street. At first, I didn't understand why this convoy wasn't traveling east on the highway; and since it didn't look like any of them were making deliveries in the area, their presence was a mystery to me. It wasn't until I was about to turn into the parking lot that I saw the OPP vehicles and a barrier across the side of the road, warning travelers that the road was closed due to snow. I soon learned that all roads out of Stratford were closed that day, and that anyone who dared to cross these barriers was doing so at their own risk (and without insurance coverage should something happen on those closed roads). On that day, it was wise to stay in town until the barriers were withdrawn and it was once again safe to travel.

Travel can be an enjoyable experience, but it is often fraught with peril. An automobile trip may include encounters with traffic, bad weather, poor road conditions, or unexpected mechanical failures that can leave a traveler stranded on the side of the road. Traveling by train or bus is often less stressful than driving, but a traveler can encounter crowded conditions and scheduling delays that can hamper a person's enjoyment of the trip. As has been in the news this week, while airline travel is usually safe there are unknown dangers in certain airplanes that have led to many scheduling delays, and sadly for the victims of the disaster in Ethiopia the loss of their lives. No matter how or where we may be going, travel often includes unexpected challenges and risks.

While travel in the modern world has its inherent dangers, it is nowhere near as perilous as travel in the ancient Middle East. Travelers had few good travel options, journeying either on foot or on an animal over rough terrain, where bandits might be lying in wait around every corner. The parable of the Good Samaritan gives us an example of the dangers of traveling at that time, as Jesus sets the scene with the description of "*a man [who] was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.*" (Luke 10:30). While the parable is a fictional story, it is rooted in the reality of travel that Jesus' listeners would have understood and might even have experienced. Whenever a person set out on a journey in ancient Israel, there were no guarantees that they would arrive safely at their destination.

Throughout much of the gospel of Luke, Jesus and his disciples are on a journey toward Jerusalem, which begins with the Evangelist's report that "*when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" (9:51). While the purpose of this trip will be revealed later in the Gospel, Jesus is determined to travel to the Holy City no matter what dangers or perils await him along the way. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is undeterred even when he is warned by the Pharisees to "*get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.*" (13:31). There is no reason to suspect that the Pharisees are party to some plan of entrapment in this story. While some Pharisees differed strongly with Jesus on interpretations of the Law, others seemed open to his teachings, even inviting Jesus to dinner in their homes, which was a sign of their acceptance of him ("*While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table.*" – 11:37). Some members of the early church were Pharisees ("*some believers ... belonged to the sect of the Pharisees*" – Acts 15:5), and Paul identified himself as a Pharisee when he was brought before the Jerusalem Council ("*Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.*" – Acts 23:6). The Pharisees appear to be sincere in warning Jesus about Herod's intention to kill Jesus if he continues his journey to Jerusalem, a very real threat given Herod's later participation in Jesus' passion and death ("*Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.*" – 23:11).

But despite the Pharisees' warning, Jesus is neither intimidated nor deterred by Herod's threat. Jesus will not die out of season, another of Herod's victims, but will finish his divinely appointed mission in Jerusalem. Jesus boldly asserts that he has nothing to fear from Herod, characterizing the tetrarch of Galilee as "that fox," a metaphor that paints Herod as sly, cunning, and voraciously destructive. Herod will not hinder Jesus from completing his work, because Jesus works under a divine imperative: *"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."* (13:33). It is the will of God that Jesus complete his journey to Jerusalem, and not even someone as powerful as Herod will hinder him from completing his work; *"Both Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his death there will be controlled by his faithfulness to God's redemptive purposes, not by Herod."* (Alan Culpepper).

In rejecting the Pharisees' warnings about continuing his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus instructs them to report to Herod about what he has been doing during his travels: *"Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work."* (13:32). These public acts demonstrate the power of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims, a realm in which *"death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."* (Revelation 21:4). The "third day" of which Jesus speaks may refer to the completion of his journey, or of his death and resurrection in Jerusalem when *"on the third day he rose from the dead"* (Apostles Creed). The divine necessity of Jesus continuing his journey despite Herod's threats sketches a profile of God's redemptive purposes that will be accomplished through Jesus' journey and his mission:

- "Why were 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, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." – 9:22.
- "For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what was written about me is being fulfilled." – 22:37.

Jesus knows that the purpose of his life and ministry must be fulfilled in Jerusalem, and there is nothing and no one who will stop him from accomplishing the Will of God for all humanity.

While the Pharisees' motives in warning Jesus about Herod may have been noble (even if they are motivated by the adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"), Jesus recognizes that this may be a fulfillment of the ominous note that ended Luke's account of his temptation in the wilderness: *"When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."* (4:13). While the ultimate "opportune time" of temptation for Jesus was as he was suffering and dying on the Cross, this was another moment in which Jesus is being tempted to abandon his mission and save himself: *"Instead of being tested with glory and authority and security – the test is fear. But the Pharisees are still encouraging Jesus to abandon his mission and save himself."* (David Ewart). But Jesus will not allow fear to deter him from his journey, the mission and purpose that will be fulfilled in Jerusalem, even though he is fully aware that it is *"the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"* (13:34). Jesus has already experienced rejection by residents of Jerusalem that he has met along his journey (*"He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon."* – 6:17), and he knows that it will be the place where not only he will suffer and die but will be the place where his followers such as Stephen will be stoned to death for proclaiming the Gospel (*"Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him ..."* – Acts 7:58). As he turns his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus laments that these are a people who *"often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"* (13:34). The image of a bird mothering her young is rooted in the Old Testament (*"Like birds hovering overhead, so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it."* – Isaiah 31:5). But even though God's people have been offered the

Lord's motherly love and protection, they would not receive it ("He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." – John 1:11). Jesus laments that because the people have rejected the Lord, "your house is left to you" (13:35), a warning of the desolation and destruction of Jerusalem that had already happened by the time Luke wrote this Gospel, fulfilling the prophetic warning of Jeremiah that "if you do not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation." (Jeremiah 22:5). But even in the midst of his lamentation and warning of desolation, Jesus offers a beatitude foreseeing the blessing that will occur when "the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" As pilgrims would sing these words as they entered Jerusalem ("Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD." – Psalm 118:26), Jesus looks ahead to his coming as the Son of Man at the end time, the message we proclaim as we come to the Lord's Supper, that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

- "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets." – Acts 3:19-21.

Jesus will not allow fear or temptation to deter him from continuing his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus is not ignorant of what awaits him when he arrives at his destination; on numerous occasions he warns his followers of the fate that awaits him in the Holy City:

- "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man but the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles, and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." – 18:31-33.

Many of his disciples did not understand why this was necessary; Peter even attempted to convince Jesus not to travel this path, rebuking him and saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22). But Jesus recognizes these words as yet another temptation to abandon his mission; and so, in turn he rebukes Peter for being an unwitting agent of the Great Tempter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (16:23). Jesus has set his mind of "divine things" when he sets his face toward Jerusalem, rejecting any temptation that would alter his course. Jesus must journey the path that leads to the fulfillment of his purpose as Saviour of all humanity, and those who would accept his invitation to discipleship must journey along the same road no matter how arduous it may be:

- "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" – 16:24-26.

Those who have chosen to follow the path of discipleship know the dangers that are inherent in accepting this call; they are also aware of the temptations they will face that will attempt to entice them to abandon the path of following Jesus in the way of the cross for alternatives which may appear appealing but which are nothing less than another "opportune time" for the devil to seek to defeat the will of God. Choosing to follow Jesus in the path that leads to the Cross means rejected the temptation to follow any other path; when a person turns their face to following Jesus, they turn they back to following anyone else.

- "The cross means sharing the suffering of Christ to the last and to the fullest. Only a man thus totally committed in discipleship can experience the meaning of the cross. The cross is there, right from the

beginning, he has only got to pick it up; there is no need for him to go out and look for a cross for himself, no need for him deliberately to run after suffering. Jesus says that every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God ... The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ's sake." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

There will always be dangers and threats that be lurking along the road that Christ calls his church to journey. It will also be tempting for every generation of God's holy people to turn back, to take another path that appears safer but will not fulfill God's purpose for God's church. It may appear that what lies ahead is leading to a dead end, that there is no hope for the future of the church whose best days are in the rear-view mirror. But those who have been called by Christ to follow him have the assurance that the journey is not in vain, and that no threat along the way will overwhelm or overcome those who journey in the way of the Cross. We have the Lord's assurance that the Word of God that we bear "*will not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*" (Isaiah 55:11). We journey in the confidence that "*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruler, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:38-39). We journey together down the road our Lord has called us to travel in confidence that "*the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus.*" (Philippians 1:6).

- "Human beings are not mere spectators ... Jesus called his disciples to *follow him*. Discipleship isn't just a matter of believing certain things or being pious; it has to do with following the One who beckons us. He wants to take us – as he took Peter and the original disciples – into the very heart of this world's darkness, where the light we've been given, however dimly it may shine in us personally, can make some difference." – Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?*

It is wise to heed the warning signs on the edges of our city during a snowstorm; but for Christians, we need not worry about what dangers might lie down the road upon which our Lord has called us to travel. We are a people who must be on our way, walking with Jesus so that we might bear the light of Christ into a world of darkness so that all may know the love of Christ that led him to Jerusalem for the salvation of all God's people.

Hello, I must be going! Amen.