**“Means and Ends”** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Transfiguration Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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On this second Sunday in Lent, I am starting with a very old story, maybe a legend. A youngster came to show a pastor a drawing of Mary and Joseph; rather than Mary riding on a donkey, he put both Mary and Joseph on an airplane to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In this, for me an unforgettable crayon drawing, their two faces were smiling out of one of the windows over the wing. And there was one further face in the cockpit–that of Pontius the pilot.

But, we know the stories at the time of Jesus’ birth were actually centered around King Herod. The three magi asked Herod where to find the king of the Jews and, wise as they were, they avoided Herod on their way home by taking another route. According to Matthew, Joseph dreamt of Herod’s threat to them so they fled to Egypt. And then, it was Herod who ordered the murder of all male children in and around Bethlehem, age two and under, in order to annihilate any possibility of royal competition. Herod used any and all means to eliminate threats to his place in the Roman system of governance and the system itself.

At the time of his birth, Jesus was threatened by Herod the Great–in our scripture today we are reading about one of his sons, Herod Antipas, who threatens him anew. And it is to my shear delight that, when the Pharisees tell him to flee, Jesus answers, “Go and tell that sly dog for me that I’m just going to keep on doing what I do, today, tomorrow, and the next day.” What a great response; keep those words on file. In today’s passage, Jesus does not change his actions or plans due to any intimidation as he tells them he will continue his work. But, he is also leaving. His answer was a clarification that he is not running nor hiding. He knows it is time to leave for Jerusalem but not out of fear of Herod. It is his purpose and his choice to walk straight into the belly of the beast.

Ultimately, Jesus is walking toward a confrontation with Pontius Pilate, the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judea under the Emperor Tiberius. But, in today’s reading, Luke describes it as a pending altercation with the *Polis*, with the City. With this language, he is lamenting power and politics. Politics have always been embedded in this story; the people of Jesus’s time do not know anything but the Caesars, their kings, and their governors; all they know is the cruel and oppressive tyranny of Rome. The Herods and Pilates controlled the people on behalf of the Emperor by controlling the food supplies. Jesus, on the other hand, fed thousands of people as though he, himself, was the source of manna in the wilderness. He was healing the sick, raising the dead, and teaching them the strength of community that rises from loving neighbors. In stating that Jerusalem is the city that kills prophets, he is stating that in the practice of politics, those who want everyone equally to have food and justice, wellness and wholeness were enemies of the Empire.

I realize I am feeling this passage as never before and perhaps belaboring the role of Empire, but something must be said in response to Elon Musk’s recent remarks. In a podcast with Joe Rogan. Musk said, “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy. . . . they’re exploiting a bug in Western civilization, which is the empathy response.” Musk stated his belief that empathy has been “weaponized.” The quote from Musk showed up on my Facebook page with an accompanying quote from Gustave Mark Gilbert who, after observing the Nuremburg trials stated, “Evil, I think is the absence of empathy. It’s the one characteristic that connects all the defendants. A genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow man.”

And then I hear Jesus say, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” As one commentator wrote, “Jesus is headed towards the historic seat of Jewish power where both kings and priests have their home. Prophetic ministry in the face of power is a dangerous activity that jeopardizes the lives of those who would speak the truth of God’s [kin-dom] to the powers that be. Jesus is no exception. But what is surprising is Jesus’ reaction. He characterizes the city as killing prophets and apostles, . . . but his response is the compassion of a mother. Jesus longs to gather Jerusalem under his wings. Jesus longs to comfort those who would reject him. He envisions Jerusalem as a brood of vulnerable chicks in need of their mother’s protection and longs to offer the same protection, salvation, to the very city where he will die. Unfortunately, Jerusalem also has a longing. The city does not want to be gathered under the salvation of Jesus” (Ruth Ann Reese, Working Preacher).

We cannot jettison this moment to the past. In Jesus’ life, when all was said and done, he served God’s kin-dom to the end without compromise. Those telling us that we’ll feel “a bit of pain” now and then it will be alright, are not known for honesty or ability to work a process, nor their wisdom. And now Musk has stated outright to show understanding, sympathy, or compassion for others–all of which are the ground of being for Jesus, is the weakness of our civilization.

So, for strength and peace of mind in these recent days, I’ve been reading essays from three books: John Philip Newell’s *The Great Search* which explores the spiritualities of Martin Buber, Carl Jung, Julian of Norwich, and Etty Hillesum among others; I’ve also been reading from a book by Richard Lischer titled *Our Hearts Are Restless* which explores the art of spiritual memoir going as far back as Augustine and includes, among others, Therese of Lisieux, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C. S. Lewis, and as far forward as Kathleen Norris and Anne Lamott; and I have been reading, *One Long River of Song*, a collection of essays by Brian Doyle. By ‘reading’ I mean I am listening to voices of faith and integrity from around the world and throughout history. It’s a practice I recommend.

Lischer was writing during the pandemic and included this in his introduction: “’I'm trying to imagine what human beings will be like in another 100 years,’ I said to my wife during one of our extended quarantines. Rain was falling on a silver gray sea off in the distance. We were no longer an ordinary married couple, but a pod, isolated and hunkered down in a dystopian universe worthy of Ray Bradbury  . . .  or maybe George Orwell. . . . ‘Or maybe we'll simply return to the silver soup,’ I added with dramatic flair. ‘Why would you say that,’ she asked. ‘You know we will always love and suffer. That will never change.’ Of course she was right. That is the promise of all spiritual memoir, one articulated by Dorothy Day in two simple rules: ‘love is the measure’ by which a life is to be judged; and ‘We write what we suffer’ (and tell the truth about it)” (Lischer, 2).

This reflection back to the pandemic is a reminder that we haven't fully processed the changes, losses, and sorrows of that time much less the previous 20 years of war and the years of growing polarization of our politics. There is the terrible destruction in Ukraine and Gaza and the massive damage from hurricanes and fires, more fires now with the tornadoes through the South last night. And now the rapid and careless destruction of a flawed but working government.

In our Psalm today we hear the psalmist vacillate between his sense of dire risk and of safety; between fear and confidence; between dread and hope. We are also growing into this rhythm. In these times, I also recommend reading the Psalms. (You can subscribe to the daily lectionary via email through pcusa.org).

Lischer’s wife’s comment, “You know we will always love and suffer,” aptly names the human condition. Lischer’s book does what the psalmist does, it brings God and ultimately God’s gifts of wholeness, wellness, and salvation into every human story.

It used to be, and probably still is in some places, that the suffering death of Jesus was used to justify spousal abuse and other family violence as well as slavery and systems built on the backs of working poor. Dorothee Solle who literally wrote the book on suffering stated, “Every acceptance of suffering is an acceptance of that which exists. The denial of every form of suffering can result in a flight from reality in which contact with reality becomes ever thinner, ever more fragmentary. It is impossible to remove oneself totally from suffering, unless one removes oneself from life itself, no longer enters into relationships, makes oneself invulnerable.”

The many King Herods and Pontius Pilate are biblical examples of those living in a thin, narrow reality; in our time too, there are leaders and some billionaire tech bros who appear to be removed from love and suffering and from life itself. They are setting a course for certain ends and, though for some, this plan bears the Christian designation, neither their ends nor their means fit my understanding of the Christian story nor the full biblical narrative. Living includes suffering, to purposely impose suffering on others goes against the command to love one another as The Christ loved us.

When that youngster drew the picture of Pontius Pilate flying Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the Roman Empire was light-heartedly hovering in the background, a long ago and far away feeling. Now it’s trying to make its home here, including images of a Caesar in the laurel crown for “2028 and Beyond.”  We then are invited to refresh our images of Jesus and this week I saw him as the one man standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square.

Jesus is still walking toward the *Polis*, on behalf of the hungry, the poor, the LGBTQ+ community, and immigrants. In these days of Lent we often speak of walking with Jesus to Jerusalem. Many thanks to those of you who attended the International Woman’s Day March last week and we have our Matthew 25 Lenten Series on Wednesday evenings to strengthen our witness in these days. I think Dorothy Day had it right, it comes down to two things: We witness, write, and say the truth about suffering. And, love is the measure by which a life is to be judged. The Savior has always asked that we align our means with his ends–today, tomorrow and in all the days ahead. May it be so. Amen.