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SCRIPTURE:

Luke 13:31-35

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² He said to them, “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. ³³ 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.’ ³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Hi everyone online!
It's preaching time!
It is good to see you all too!

I'm Janice Harmon, Minister of Care, Connection & InterGen Nurture.

Let's jump right in. Would you listen again to the first two verses of our text.

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² He said to them, “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.

Even Jesus got frustrated when folks didn't behave as he would have liked.

Verses 31-33 talk about death threats from Herod and how my Jesus told the Pharisees what they could do with their warning. I love Jesus' humanness. We love to pretty-up Jesus...

So, even when he is being --oh so human-- we want to make it more palatable.

You heard it right... Jesus said “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen’...

One of my best friends says: ‘Don't mess with Janice if you hear her say, “Listen, here.”

And... that is what my ears heard Jesus say: ‘Listen here, you go tell that fox for me, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day... I finish my work.’

In other words... Pharisees/Church Leaders... I do not have time for your foolishness. I'm heading to Jerusalem.

Jesus continues in the JPHV to say: “besides, it is not possible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

Listen to Jesus? Do you hear my Lord? He's angry and then we hear frustration in verses 34-35.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

These two verses is where we will sit today. This is the Jesus lesson we need to hear and where our sermon series, “Good Enough” connects to this scripture.

Earlier in the service, our liturgist, Arvina, said: we probably aren’t receiving death threats from Herod as Jesus was, but our wellbeing could be threatened by the idea (the sinister idea) that if we just try hard enough, or act nice enough, or say just the right thing, *life* will *always* go our way.

We run around in so many directions, trying to herd the chicks into some imagined semblance of perfect formation (have you ever tried to herd chicks?). What if we could let go of needing all things and all people to be “just so” and instead discover how to partner with our God of peace while things that are out of control unfold all around?

Our human penchant for control is perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of our human brains. What we desire—our longing for particular outcomes—can often keep us driven to distraction and exhaustion. Yes, so much of life’s circumstances are out of our control. Jesus knows he can only bring the message – but he cannot make people accept it. He faces grave danger to bring the Good News and yet, we, like Jerusalem, are not willing to be gathered by Jesus.

Our sermon series “Good Enough” is based on the work of Kate Bowler. I was not familiar with her work prior to this series. If you are like me... I wanted to share a little about her. Ms. Bowler, who was diagnosed with stage-4 breast cancer in 2014, teaches at Duke Divinity and one of her fellow professors Will Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop says: “Behind a lot of her work is a prophetic critique of American consumerist culture, of American fantasies and our sense of exceptionalism.” “She’s a well-formed Christian in the Mennonite tradition who responds to pain and difficulty and challenges differently than others and she’s so successful at communicating that.”

Bowler is careful to point out that despite her critique of cultural norms around health, wealth and suffering, she does not lack hope.

“We can be people of deep hope,” she said. “That is not the same thing as saying our lives are going to work out. As a person of faith I believe God is drawing us

toward a future that is fundamentally a story of love and the salvation of the world.

“That’s not the same thing as saying that my life, all my hopes and dreams, is going to play out the way I imagined.”

Bowler has written a lot about prosperity preachers and the ‘name it and claim it’ religion that is so prevalent in America. It is easy to unwittingly believe in a God that resembles Santa Claus. If God as Santa is our spiritual foundation, then we are in for a rude awakening or apocalypse when life is out of control, when temples fall, when institutions or people disappoint, when our health fails or our marriage ends or our children do not turn out to be Mini-Me’s.

When so much is out of our control... our default is to gather our chicks, to reinforce our defenses, or ‘fake it until we make it.’ All of these are worldly and secular responses to life.

Our text today is here to disrupt our tendencies. Yes it is true that Jesus is busy casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow. But does that mean every prayer I offer will be answered the way I want? No. There is suffering in this life. There is heartache and each and every one of us will pass away. I have not read anywhere in the Bible that there will be no pain or suffering on this side of glory.

If you read Ms. Bowler’s book “Everything happens for a reason (and other lies I’ve loved),” you know that we try all kinds of theological backflips to reason our way out of the discomfort we feel about suffering. If we can’t control things, then surely God is in control of every little thing, we think. And yet, the logic doesn’t hold alongside a theology of a compassionate, grace-full God. The psycho-spiritual fallout from such “do good = good things happen” control-thinking deems some people failures simply by virtue of the tragedies that happen to them. Instead, can we adjust our understanding of divine presence as a loving partner who is there no matter where the dance takes us? Emmanuel = God with us... is a better equation.

This name it and claim it faith is not mine.
And it is not the faith culture I was raised in.

Instead, I have been keenly aware that life is hard. Life is not fair.
Young people **and** old people die. So, I am still learning to walk in the truth that I
am not in control. No amount of negotiating, pleading, or correctness keeps us
from heartache along this life journey.

When things are out of control,
We know a God who wants to gather us like a hen gathers chicks under its wings.
Will we allow it? Will we draw close or will we choose our way instead of thine O
Lord?

I love Bowler’s statement that we “walk among the fellowship of the afflicted.”
The fellowship of the afflicted. That is humanity 101.
She says, it is a club no one wants to join.

The truth is... bad things happen to good people.
Every marriage will not last. Only some do.
Every soldier will not return home from war. Countless will.
Everyone won’t survive cancer, but many will.
I’ve known so many people who have died in the past couple of years. This
pandemic, it has made us all feel like “so much is out of our control.”

And yet, I still know a God who wants to intervene into our circumstance.
Listen here... there is Good News!
Some of you know I was a journalist for over 10 years with the state paper in NJ --
The Star-Ledger. My editor... Barbara Kukla, she’s been living with stage-4 cancer
for 30 years. When she was first diagnosed she was frantic. You see Barbara had
watched her mom suffer and die from (pause) -- breast cancer.

Listen here... You and I know a Savior who was crucified, overcame death, was
resurrected, to intercede with Father Time on behalf of Barbara Kukla and Kate
Bowler. Thirty years of vibrant life, even when ‘so much is out of our control.’

We do not have the cure to cancer and we cannot act or live perfect enough to
avoid hardship and pain...

When so much is out of our control...
whether it be wars and rumors of war
whether it be our mental or physical health
whether it be errant spouses, children, or grandchildren. We are the fellowship of the afflicted and yet... we are loved by a God who wants to gather us like a hen gathers her brood under her wings. Are we willing?

In this Lukan scripture today, Jesus is calling Jerusalem to repent, but a people or a nation must admit and be conscious of its wrongdoing in order to change its commitments, policies, and practices.

Do we have some troubling practices and beliefs that do not align with the biblical writ?

Do we secretly believe that our God operates like a mystical Santa Claus? Do we silently practice psycho-spiritual mathematics of: “do good = only good things happen?”

Or, are we like Christ, spurred by love, which fuels courage in the face of fear; a love that renders us willing to be gathered close by the power of loving God in the midst of pain, sorrow, and chaos?

My constant hope, and prayer, is that we are journeying towards Jerusalem, with a heart full of compassion that will not waver in the midst of things that are constantly out of control. But also with a clear-eyed understanding that journeying through this life will knock us down.

As we head to Jerusalem with Jesus during this Lenten season, let us take time to examine our own hearts, and reflect on the beliefs and attitudes that lurk in the recesses of our hearts and run contrary to the reality that on this side of glory there is pain and suffering for all.

May the love of our Savior Jesus the Christ shelter us in days of trouble, and lead us on level paths.

When things are out of control, may God’s grace-filled love transform our frustrations into courage to get back up again... and again. May it be so.

Amen.