



IN THE LINE OF FIRE

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Luke 13:31-35

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At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 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. 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.' 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! 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.'"

This is not a popular text for prosperity preachers. Read these five short verses the question is not, "will Jesus be killed by the powers that be?" but "how soon?" I am always amazed by the idea among some Christians that following Jesus is like having your own lucky leprechaun. Just follow Jesus and you'll earn public service awards, receive critical acclaim, and people will break in line to give you money. Whether genuine in their concern or not, Pharisees warn Jesus about the killing intent of Herod and Jesus has them tell Herod, "You know where to find me." And, make no mistake, Herod will find him and will have his pound of Jesus' flesh.

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was preaching at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis. In his sermon, he declared: "I don't know what will happen now . . . but it doesn't matter to me . . . I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Not cowering before the power brokers of segregation, King stood in that pulpit

and announced, "You know where to find me." And, the very next day, a sniper for segregation found him within his line of fire and executed his deadly shot.

For almost all of my preaching life, people have told me, "Gary, keep politics out of church." To which my standard response is: "I wish I could, but I can't if I am going to follow Jesus." In this text, Jesus stares down the political machinations of Herod and says, "You ole fox, you know where to find me." But that is not all Jesus says. He tells Herod: "When you send your killing team to do their deadly work, you will find me tending to the afflicted, especially among the poor and the most vulnerable. Herod, I will be doing exactly what you should be doing, rather than building another monument in your own honor! And, Herod, I'll be doing this not just in the boonies, not somewhere safely out of the line of fire, but in the city, THE city. And when I enter Jerusalem, I am not going to gather an angry mob and burn the city to the ground. I am going to love this city into life."

The Jesus we meet in Luke does not shy away from the power players, does not duck from the cunning foxes when he finds himself in the line of fire, nor does he fire back with words laced with venom and let loose religious storm troopers of violence. The Jesus we meet in Luke can always be found bringing in those cast out, raising up those beaten down, holding on to those living on the edge.

In Luke, Jesus tells us a prodigal son welcomed home by a father who bears a remarkable resemblance to God, whose compassion is extravagant and whose love seems reckless. In Luke, Jesus tells us of a good Samaritan to folk who thought that the only "good" Samaritan was a dead Samaritan. Luke remembers a "good" thief, who is invited into Paradise while dying on a cross next to Jesus. In Luke, the first sermon of Jesus is taken straight from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

"Keep politics out of church, Gary." Tell that to Jesus. Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus engages in one political act after another or engages in activities that have immense political implications. Social reversal, the low being brought high, no doubt at the expense of those who are on high. Ethnic reversal, putting the "wrong" people in the right light at the expense of the right people. Economic reversal, noting that God has come not first to the wealthy, but to the poor. The only way to keep politics out of the church is to keep Jesus out of the church.

But the Jesus we meet in Luke does not fear political and religious conflict; he heads with divine determination right into the Jerusalem line of fire, and he takes his followers with him. Jesus heads into Jerusalem to imagine a different kind of city than one that kills all its prophets. Jesus heads right into the line of fire, not waiting for a sword to don his shoulders to be knighted "Sir Jesus," but to have a sword pierce his side for daring to challenge the powers that be.

Long before most of us were born or were worshiping in this sanctuary, wise leaders looked out the front doors of Washington Street, saw two cannons on the Capitol lawn facing Central, and decided to stay right here, right in the line of fire. On May 9, 1937, the Atlanta Journal Constitution wrote this article: "After seventy-five years of gracious history in its present location, the Central Presbyterian Church has decided to remain there. Instead of moving from downtown Atlanta as many other churches have done, it will continue its ministries where they began. . . . 'Our life began here nearly eighty years ago in the center of this city. Our name has always been the Central Presbyterian Church, and this is what we intend to remain – Central' (The Atlanta Journal, May 9, 1937).

For years, Central's nickname has been, "The Church That Stayed" and given the decision of 1937, appropriately so. In light of this story from Luke, maybe we should add a hyphen to that nickname followed by the phrase, "And You Know Where to Find Us." You will find us in the line of fire safeguarding the young chicks that the foxes readily consume. You will find us trying to make the heart of our city more humane through the cooperative work of Central, the Shrine and Trinity in our Capitol

Hill Neighborhood Development Corporation. You will find us trying to make the heart of our city more compassionate as we advocate not only for adequate shelter space for those experiencing homelessness, but transitional housing and permanent jobs for those ready to move out of homelessness. You will find us concerned for more than those who live in our city as we walk across the street to speak on behalf of prisoner families now denied basic human touch during their visits to loved ones on death row, on behalf of children in our public schools whose educational future is being threatened by channeling public funds to private institutions, on behalf of our state's water being treated as a political commodity to be hoarded rather than a God-given resource to be nurtured.

Soon after this text in Luke, Jesus will enter Jerusalem not to burn the city to the ground, but to claim it again as a city not governed by a cunning fox that silences all public dissent, as Herod silenced the voice of John the Baptist, but a city governed by the just vision of a loving God who shelters the most vulnerable from being preyed upon by the most powerful. The city that Jesus envisions is one in which speaking the truth does not lead to torture and living the truth does not lead to public execution, but to the renewal of life, renewal of the city.

This thorny text from Luke ends with Jesus saying, "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.'" In just a few weeks, we will walk around the block with our friends from the Shrine and Trinity. We will wave palm branches and sing, "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." On that day, we will remember Jesus' grand entry into Jerusalem, but we will also look forward to the day women in black will come to the tomb looking for death but find life. Even beyond that day of resurrection, as we wave our palm branches we will look forward to the day when all the cannons are silenced and all the cunning foxes have no power, the day about which John sees in his Revelation, when "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:3, NIV).

In the meantime, if someone should ask you how to find Central, by God's grace, may the answer be: "You know where to find us, staring down the cannons, standing right in the line of fire in the heart of this beloved city of God, armed with the life transforming power of the Crucified One who loves the city, who loves each of us, into life.

AMEN