

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Bill Tiemann
“Outstretched Wings”
Luke 13:31-35; Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14
Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010

I'm getting what I deserve. When a small group of us were “Gathering Around the Word” Thursday night a couple of weeks ago, and we looked at this strange gospel text that I just read—the one that has all kinds of layers of meaning inside it, Julie was hesitant about preaching from it. The Old Testament lesson, Psalm 27, which Lib/Shelli read, was much more welcoming. But I said something like: “Oh, Julie, go ahead and try it. It'll be good for you.” Julie is bright, and I knew she could do it. Now, she's sick, and Lib has other responsibilities at 11 a.m. and Shelli has other obligations at 8:30 a.m., so I have to eat my words and do it myself. Obviously, that's good for me. As for you, maybe you just better plan to come back next Sunday.

The theme is danger—and shelter from danger. It fits perfectly with our whole theme for Lent: *Abiding in the Shelter of the Lord*. It starts out with Jesus in danger, being warned by some friendly Pharisees that Herod is out to kill him. There is no shelter for Jesus, except maybe the long tradition he mentions, that only in Jerusalem are prophets killed, and he's not there yet. But he will be soon and he knows it. When he gets to Jerusalem, all protection will end.

But that's not his concern. He's got work to do right now, healing, preaching, casting out demons. That's his ministry. Danger will not stop him, not even that old fox Herod who's out to do him in.

If you've been watching the Olympics these last two weeks, you've seen some amazingly skilled athletes doing extremely dangerous things. Even before the games began, a young Luge driver from the republic of Georgia was killed. But the Luge competition went on as planned, although the run was shortened.

Bobsleds go over 90 miles an hour at the end of their run, and if they get slightly off course, they turn over, and there can be serious injuries. But the drivers continued to make their runs time after time.

And what about the downhill skiers? They go all out on that icy, winding run and some don't make it to the bottom, but end up in the hospital instead. Yet, up at the top, there are others who can't wait to take their turn. Danger simply does not deter these brave athletes, any more than it deters the brave Marines moving through Marjah, pacifying that city in Afghanistan. And danger did not deter Jesus. He just kept doing his work, no matter what the future would hold.

But there is also in these words from Luke the theme of shelter. It expresses itself in the concern of Jesus for the people of Jerusalem, who do kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to them. Jesus has great compassion for them, for their scared way of life which is so full of fear. “How often,” he says to Jerusalem, “have I desired to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” With great compassion, Jesus wanted to shelter these fear-filled

people from their destructive way of life, as a mother hen spreads her wings and gathers her chicks under them, when a hawk appears overhead.

I grew up on a farm, as many of you know, and we had lots of chickens. Again and again, I'd see this happening. A mother hen would be in the barnyard with her brood of chicks, and a chicken hawk would fly over. And she'd gather those chicks under her wings in no time. If my dad was home, he's go get his shotgun, because we were not into the business of protecting raptors. We were out to produce eggs to trade for groceries.

Now, today, I'd look up and try to determine if this was a Harris Hawk or a Red-tailed Hawk or a Northern Harrier. But not then. Every hawk overhead was the enemy.

As Julie wrote in her blurb about this scripture, this Biblical picture of a mother hen sheltering her chicks is a beautiful symbol of our Lenten theme: *Abiding in the Shelter of the Lord*. But I want to explore those forces that cause us to resist shelter, and also what might happen to us to cause us to seek it.

In this academic community, I suppose it's OK to use the term, the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is a catch-all term which means a belief that human reason is sufficient. No matter what disciplines we pursue, no matter what jobs we do, no matter what relationships we undertake, if all of these are guided by the best of human reason, they will work out well. If we use all the methods that the social sciences and the physical sciences provide, we will find our way to that great society where all of humankind is nourished in mind and body and spirit. So, there is no need for anything more, like those superfluous superstitions we sometimes call religion, or even, in our case, Christianity.

Now, pure reason has long been called into question, from Immanuel Kant onward. But most of us are still far more influenced by it than we think. The most common word we use today to describe our condition is secularism. We are mostly a secular people living in a secular society, and if we have any religion about us at all, it is most likely a veneer of faith rather than a deep commitment. We go about most of our life as though God did not exist, believing our own smarts are enough to get us through.

Now, if we are asked, most of us say we believe in God. But we also assume we don't need the church, or any heavy faith involvement that might lead to weekly worship. Sundays are for sleeping late, reading the papers, going out for brunch, doing the laundry, stocking up on groceries, and maybe catching a movie. The most common way we hear this attitude expressed is when people say they are "spiritual but not religious." I have no idea what that means, and I don't think they do, either.

This, I think, is the danger Jesus is talking about when he describes the people of Jerusalem. They are like sheep without a shepherd--lost, scared, living in fear, assuming they can get by on their own. And so they kill the prophets and stone those sent to help them. Is it too much to say that we, in our time, do the same thing? We silence our prophets with words of abuse, and we stone with constant criticism those who are sent to save us.

Now, no one has done a better job of bringing judgment on this whole way of life than that strange Dane who lived well over a hundred years ago: Soren Kierkegaard. In his day, the secular

society was the state church. Every citizen was a member. You were a Christian simply because you were born and baptized in the church and that was that. You were Christian by being part of the crowd, kind of like a lot of Americans today assume that simply believing in God, as the crowd does, is enough.

Kierkegaard would not buy that. He said that faith involves inwardness—living out a relationship with God. “The idea of being a Christian as a matter of course is a contradiction in terms. You cannot fall in love as a matter of course, or be in love because you belong to a society that talks about love.”

Kierkegaard was rigorous. Either Christianity is true or it is false. What it cannot be is a little bit true. If it is true, then it demands that everything else take second place to living out our relationship with God. If it is not true, then it is irrelevant. In other words, Kierkegaard wishes the reader to face the challenge of either all or nothing. If it is true it demands the whole of a person’s life.

Now, that’s tough stuff. Not many of us can live up to it. But I think that describes our danger today better than anything else. We all live as though Christianity is just a little bit true. And we are the ones Jesus would like to take under his sheltering wings, like a mother hen protects her brood of chicks, from the danger of the hawk above. Today, the hawk that hovers over us is this secular society in which we live, and which has profound influence on us all.

Now, what can change that for us? In Presbyterian theology, we say the Holy Spirit blows through our society, in ways that we do not know, to transform individual lives toward a deeper faith. In other words, the Spirit is the means by which we begin to abide in the shelter of the Lord.

In practice, that can work out in all kinds of ways. My son in New Mexico has had a part time job recently with a company grading themes submitted by kids in the No Child Left Behind program. The subject they are asked to write on is: describe the person who has had the most influence on your life. He says that reading those papers has been an eye opener, because of the wide variety of people the kids write about. Mostly, the kids write about a teacher or a coach or a grandparent who has changed their life for the better. Usually, he says, it’s the grandparents, because they are the ones who come to the school plays or watch the kids play basketball or go concerts where the kids play in the band. The parents don’t come, because these kids are mostly from low income neighborhoods, where there are lots of single parents who work long hours and seldom even see their kids.

I think we often downgrade the influence for good we have on others—our own grandchildren, our neighbor kids, the kids in our Sunday School class, the Scouts in our troop, the young scholars in our classrooms, the students from Davidson College we adopt into our families.

This week, some of us had the privilege of being invited to the Church and Vocation dinner in Charlotte, honoring former students from Davidson College, who have been challenged to attend a seminary, by a gift of one year’s free tuition. What a delightful privilege to hear the testimony of this lineup of young adults of how this one year changed their lives. Not all went in the ministry, but all were profoundly influenced for good. The Spirit was at work, through all these very human agencies.

But one more way in which the Spirit may work to bring us shelter is not a comfortable way, but often a needed way. What I mean is that sometimes we are brought closer to God by some sickness or tragedy or accident or death that profoundly changes our lives.

As you know, I spend a lot of my time with older folks in our church, either at The Pines and or in their homes. By the law of averages, it seems that the older we get, the more likely we are to have unexpected illnesses or surgery or tragedy strike us. Not always, because we also have some very young children who are seriously ill. But mostly, the folks we see in the hospitals and rehab centers and Health Care at the Pines are older. I don't know of one who has not somehow been brought closer to God by this experience. It's a tough way to find the shelter of the Lord, but they do.

I know that our program staff members are hoping that, by using this Lenten theme, folks won't wait till old age to seek the Lord's shelter, but better late than never. The good thing is: the shelter is always there; it is always available; and it provides hope and comfort in ways that often we had not even expected.

Let me close with this. In 1979, Michael Joncas, as Roman Catholic priest, composed a song for the Catholic mass, which, after Vatican II, could use hymns in contemporary language. He based his song on Psalm 91, the words we have used for our Lenten theme: You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord: "My refuge and my fortress, in whom I trust." But he when he came to write the chorus, he used the words of Isaiah 40:31: ". . . but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles." Eventually, the song became one we all know well: "On Eagle's Wings." They say it is now used at most Catholic funeral masses. Many of you remember the chorus goes like this:

And he will raise you up on eagle's wings,
Bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you shine like the sun,
And hold you in the palm of his hand.

That's a different image than the shelter of a mother hen guarding her chicks. But one that also seems to fit our theme.

In this life, perhaps we can say that our goal is to abide in the shelter of the Lord, in the shadow of the Almighty. That may be our best image.

But, at the end of our life, perhaps we need a different image, like this one: "And he will raise us up, on eagle's wings . . . And hold us in the palm of his hand." I think that works, too, because both images describe "outstretched wings!"

That's the good news for DCPC this Sunday morning.