

A Bipolar Text

Probably bipolar was not the best term to use for the title of this sermon—schizophrenic might have been better, but as I am not that familiar with the actual definitions of these psychological terms, I think they capture a hint of the disconnect I was sensing that seems present in our gospel text. I was seeking something that expressed the concept of two pieces or parts of a unit which really seemed not be compatible, to not fit together. There is confrontation and grief expressed here. You would think that in a text that only has five verses, there wouldn't be room for such inconsistent themes to be present, but these verses seem to be almost exploding with different things trying to get our attention within those themes. First there is this very odd exchange between Jesus and some Pharisees which opens the passage. Verse 31: "At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get from here, for Herod wants to kill you." Up until this point in Luke's narrative Jesus' exchanges with the Pharisees in general have not exactly been cordial. He has shared table fellowship with them; has debated issues with them, but in general has been highly critical of them and their leadership of God's people. Additionally, historically the presentation of the Pharisees by the church leaves us with the impression that they were uniformly in opposition to Jesus and his teachings. So when we come upon the few examples which contradict that impression, we are at least startled and often overlook them. Even at the very beginning, this passage presents us with something unusual. Some Pharisees come and warn Jesus to get out of town. This seems a very un-Pharisee thing to do, doesn't it? Why are they telling him to get out of harm's way? Don't they too like Herod, have it out for him because of what he has been teaching and doing? Or are they like Nicodemus who appears in John's gospel, curious and searching? Or could they perhaps be Herod's double agents, come to spy and report back on Jesus' plans and whereabouts? It's really hard to tell from the warning that they give as the text presents it. And what do we make of Jesus' response? Verse 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.'" Jesus certainly doesn't seem concerned about either the Pharisee's motive or Herod's intent. He certainly isn't keeping any secrets about what he is doing. His response continues with verse 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." Jesus has already told his disciples that he will be betrayed and undergo great suffering and death, so in this response we can see that Jesus is making it clear that while Herod may think that he is in control of the plot—he isn't. Jesus' death will happen, but the where and the when isn't up to Herod. When the events of Holy Week unfolded, the disciples surely believed that Rome, or Herod or the Temple priests were the ones in control of events. However, within this response of Jesus, with this statement of Jesus' determination, we can see that although that was the appearance, it was not the reality. And maybe, that is an important feature of the text for us to see and appreciate when we look at the world around us today. It may seem like earthy powers win, but that is an illusion. They are not the ones who have the final word. So we need to hang on, to keep the faith and pay attention to the places where the reign of God does break in. Jesus is clear about his course, but he is also clearly grieved by what is coming as he laments in verse 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!" Jerusalem, the holy city of God, the place where God had chosen to dwell among the chosen people had strayed again and again from the covenant promises, had failed to remain true to the ways of God, refused to listen when God sent messenger to them, and as Jesus is on his way to complete his mission, he knows that again betrayal and rejection await yet another one sent to them. This adds another layer of complexity to this text that we need to consider. The place that is the pinnacle of the Jewish faith is also ground zero for the worst sort of betrayal, cruelty and violence. The place where God's will and purpose should be most evident to all has rejected God's anointed and the message he has brought. The Pharisees here act out of character. Herod is not the one in control. And Jerusalem, the Holy city rejects the Lord's anointed. The only clear and unwavering one in this text is Jesus. He is direct and clear: Go and tell that fox I am going to keep right on casting out demons and curing today and tomorrow and I will finish up the day after that...then I will leave here...not because I am afraid of him...but because it is now time for the next part of my mission and that requires that I go to Jerusalem. That is where my mission is going to end and then it will really begin on the third day. I got to get going. I've got work to do. This brief text is a synopsis of Jesus' mission—it holds together Jesus' life and death. Jesus' actions during his public ministry have been to bring about deliverance—from hunger, from blindness or illness, from pain and suffering. His ministry has been about healing and wholeness—casting out demons and curing; it has been about demonstrating how God's kingdom looks here. The journey to Jerusalem and the cross is part of the process of establishing God's kingdom. The reference to the third day is also a reminder for us that the death on the cross is not the end of his work. Jesus' work of healing and deliverance does not end with the crucifixion—it will not be undone by death. Although Jesus is very aware what traveling toward Jerusalem means—that it is a city with a hostile record toward prophets—the death that comes to him in Jerusalem will itself be undone by the resurrection. After stating that he knows that Jerusalem, the historic seat of Jewish power where both kings and priests have their homes, is hostile to prophets, he laments this hostility. Jesus' response to the hostility—the unwillingness of Jerusalem to be gathered is not anger, but grief. The image used for this section is of a mother hen spreading her wings as a protective cover over a brood of chicks. The desire of Jesus to gather and the unwillingness of people to come to him are placed side by side here. And in this image, despite all the layers presented, we find the unifying core of this text—the reason that Jesus came to dwell among us—For God so loved the world. This desire to heal, to restore, to gather the people of God back into the relationship of love is at the heart of that journey that set Jesus on the path to Jerusalem and to that cross on the hill between two thieves. In this latter portion of the text before us which is known as Jesus' lament over Jerusalem we have the juxtaposition of God's love shown through Jesus' love for humanity, the children of Jerusalem and the reality that his message—the truth that he has spoken profoundly discomforts those children he so loves. The truth is we have a discomforting God; a God that loves us but a God that expects us to also love. The discomforting fact for us today is that in this text, we are most likely Jerusalem; at least we often act like Jerusalem. When we hear the words of Jesus in the context of our lives—in some instances in may bring comfort. But sometimes, when that word speaks the whole truth to us, it still may bring considerable discomfort. We would

rather hear the message of Jesus which only brings us comfort, but the word he brings resists conforming to our desires. We want to shrink Jesus down to our personal size and commitment level. Jesus did not belong to either the establishment or to the revolutionary party of his day—he refused to be their king. For those who supported law and order—he was a rebel, and dangerous to the system they upheld. For those who were active revolutionaries, he was a non-violent lover of peace. He offended the passive, world-forsaking ascetics by his worldliness. And for the devout who adapted to the world, he was too uncompromising. For the silent majority he was too noisy and for the noisy, he was too quiet, too gentle for the strict and too strict for the gentle. In other words, he was attacked on all sides. Today, time and again, if we listen to what Jesus taught, it counters our status-conscious, competitive and consumerist culture's values. We like to hear: "Watch out for number one." Jesus says, "You're not number one." The world promotes: "Tit for tat." Jesus says, "Do good to those who hate you." We would like to hear, "Watch out for your own." Jesus proposes, "If anyone needs it, give him your coat." We'd like to believe, "Charity begins at home." Jesus tells us, "Give him your shirt too." The world tells us not to be a fool." Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the merciful." We want to hear, "Strive to be first." Jesus has told us, "The first shall be last." None of these truths that Jesus has told us about the ways of God's kingdom are likely to make us comfortable when we look at the way we organize our lives. Throughout Lent as we contemplate the cross we are called to consider whether our ways of living are forms of discipleship that reflect the ways taught by Jesus, the way of love. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.