

Following the Footsteps of Jesus; into the Synagogue

February 24, 2013

Shepherd's Grace Church

Luke 13.31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²He 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. ³³Yet 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.' ³⁴Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, 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.'" (also read Gen. 15: 1-12, 17-18, Phil. 3: 17-4: 1)

Have you ever wondered why the stories in the Hebrew Bible seem to take so long to unfold? Moses was up on the mountain last week for 10 chapters. Abram's story takes 10 chapters to unfold as does the story of Isaac. Jacob takes almost as long and there are even more chapters devoted to Joseph. The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible taxes us 21st century Christians. We live in a 24/7/365 work-a-day world where we are interested in getting our information at a fast pace and exactly when we want it. The Hebrew Bible Just Does Not Give Us a Thirty Second Sound Bite!

Recall the story of Abram that was told this morning. Abram has been called 4 chapters ago. The Lord has promised that He is chosen and from him there will be a great nation. Now, four chapters later, we are still reading about God's promise, we are still waiting, watching, wondering how God is going to bring about this incredible accomplishment. What is taking so long!

God called in chapter 12. Abram answered, responded and went. He went to Shechem, then to Egypt. He built an altar to the Lord at Beersheba, and as he traveled down to Egypt became concerned for his own safety. Now Abram was 89 years old when he traveled down, and his wife, Sarai was 79. Despite their advanced age, Abram thought his wife was so hot as to be attractive to Pharaoh. You men should pay special attention to this story. Abram, a man of old age by any standard still thought his wife, an octogenarian, was so attractive that she might be hit on by Pharaoh.

Abram took matters into his own hands in this situation and concocted a plan where Sarai would pass herself off as his sister. As sister, she could speak well of him to Pharaoh and eliminate any concern of Abram as a threat. The problem, aside from what we might consider obvious problems of old age and

unattractiveness, was that this was Abram's plan. Abram, instead of seeking after the Lord for a solution to the problem sought to put his own plan into place! He sought to make his own rules for behavior.

God on the other hand knew the fullness of His promise to Abram, that He, God, would make of Abram a great nation! God's plan included Sarai and could be foiled if she became defiled! Fortunately, God stepped into this situation and saved Abram and Sarai from any embarrassment, but because of Abram's inclination to take matters into his own hands, God needed to teach. God needed to be sure that this one, this one to whom an incredible promise was made would learn to yield to God's plan and not be led into temptation when circumstances became difficult.

God wants to be sure of each of us as He reveals the fullness of His promise to us as well. God wants to know that when we face difficult situations we will turn first to Him and not to our own devices! Until we are willing to step forward in faith, we will continue to be frustrated by our own actions. Paul expresses it concisely this morning as he reminds us that those who resist God, specifically those who resist Jesus serve a different God, the god of their own self interest. God, our God, the God of Abram wants to know that we will serve only Him. Last week when Jesus was tempted by the devil, He taught us the correct response. It is written that we will worship God alone and Him alone will we serve!

In Chapter 14, Abram demonstrates his willingness to learn. He refuses the spoils of victory in favor of God's promise thereby telling God that he is prepared to trust him. Now we come to chapter 15. Once again Abram is confronted by God. Abram is in prayer, in worship and hears clearly God's promise! Here in this moment, Abram appropriately lays out his concerns before God!

I often hear from people, "I just don't get anything out of worship! The question I want to ask is, "What do you put into worship?" Do you come to worship prepared to engage the Lord, your God? Do you come prepared to ask God the tough questions in your life? Do you come willing to leave yourself, your very life at the altar? Abram did! This is exactly what God is asking Abram and us to do! This is exactly what Paul is asking the Philippians to do! "Stand firm in the Lord!" Come to Him with your concerns, your questions, your heart!

Abram's question? I am old he said. I have only a slave as my heir! How will you make a great nation from a slave. God replied, my promise does not come from slavery but from liberty! My promise comes from my freedom to act as God and not be bound by the limitations you place on Me! My promise comes because I am the Lord your God!

Abram asks the question and then notice how little else Abram says. Abram is in a place of worship, a deep place of spiritual connection and he says almost nothing. He raises his concern and then he listens. When we come to worship, do we come prepared to listen? Do we come prepared to hear the word of God? Abram didn't just ask an idle question, he asked the question of his heart. He spoke to his

greatest concern! What is your greatest concern today? Are you willing to lay it before the Lord? How can we follow the footsteps of Jesus if we are not willing to lift up the struggles we have in staying on the path?

God answers Abram's question while Abram practices his acts of worship. Abram makes a sacrifice. He brings his tithes and offerings and lays them before the Lord. The Lord blesses them and then notice what He does! He returns them to Abram. When we give to God, God gives back to us. He doesn't always give back dollar for dollar, but He gives the desires of our heart. Here God gives back a covenant! He leads Abram outside and invites him to look up at the stars in the sky. As Abram looks up, we are invited to look up as well. We are invited to imagine the magnitude of God's promise as we imagine the magnitude of God's creation. How great is God's desire for us? It is as great as the stars in the sky! It is as great as the sands on the seashore! We are God's covenant with Abram, we are God's chosen! This is the covenant God makes with Abram this morning and it is exactly where the Epistle lesson, the Hebrew lesson and the Gospel meet us today!

Today, as we worship we are invited to worship with Jesus. We are in the synagogue, we are among the crowds who gather just to catch a glimpse of Him. We are eager to engage Him, to talk to him, to learn from him, but are we willing to listen. Our citizenship is in Heaven where we will be transformed into the chosen people of God! This is God's covenant with us, this is His promise. At this very hour God wants to deliver that promise! How will we receive it? Will we follow the footsteps of Jesus, or will we follow the gods of our human desires?

When I was young, about second grade, my family was not much into going to church. I remember one Sunday morning being downstairs and asking my dad why we didn't go. He said, in a plain and matter of fact voice, if you want to go to church, I will take you! I don't know why I was excited about that, or why I remember, but that moment, that morning has been a focal point in my life. There was something special about my asking, but more, there was something special about my dad's matter-of-fact response!

From that moment forward, every Sunday I had a chance, I went to church. I was not always the perfect angel though! I can remember the offering money my dad would give me after I was able to walk to Sunday School on my own. See, there was a grocery store on the way and there was a great selection of candy just calling my name...penny candy where a dime would fill your pocket with a day's fun, but, and I suppose somewhat thankfully there was a store manager who knew me, and who knew my dad. The grocery store detour only lasted a few weeks but the somewhat painful reminder still lingers today! Ouch!

Never-the-less, I continued to go to Sunday School and church. My dad's punishment never threatened that. I met countless friends there. We sang in the choir, were involved in youth group and when we

were finally old enough to sit separate from our parents, we would sit up in the balcony on Sunday mornings. That was one of the places it was acceptable to be seen with your girl friend. We could sit there and hold hands and be a part of worship!

One Sunday I would sit with Jan and another with Carla and another with Karen. The girls seemed to come and go. They were always a part of the group as were the guys. We would sit and be present, but we wouldn't always listen. There were just too many distractions! There was just too much going on in our world to be concerned with the seemingly external matters of worship. We weren't putting much into worship and as a result, we weren't getting much out! We continued to go, to go through the actions, but we were not really engaged. We were much more concerned with how we did church than why we did church.

As I read Jesus' words this morning according to Luke, I sometimes wonder if we have progressed very much. This morning, we come to church and we enter into a place where God would have actually put His feet. We climb the steps where He would have walked, we imagine sitting on the benches where He would have sat, we let our mind wander to a time when He would have gone forward to unroll the scroll and read the words, interpret the words. We imagine being enraptured by the words, by His ability to hold our attention. Suddenly we are assaulted!

Jesus has gone beyond just reading the words and sharing the prayers. He has brought the reality of the world into the Synagogue! He has healed a person in our midst. This we sit and watch in open-mouthed amazement! We see the person, a friend...perhaps, an acquaintance...almost certainly, and now she is healed! How do we respond? Are we filled with joy at the new found health and well being of the person, or are we maybe just a little bit jealous? Do we secretly wish Jesus had discovered our brokenness and made us whole? Were we willing...as Abram was, to lay our need before the lord and make our sacrifices to engage in the conversation or were we the ones who said, "I can worship as well standing in a field as I can in church. I just don't get anything out of worship!" Jesus reminds us again today, just as God reminded Abram so long ago...it is about what you put into worship. By faith we are counted righteous, even as Abram was.

At that very hour, at the very time Jesus performed his healing on the Sabbath, some Pharisees...perhaps wondering the same things we were wondering as we witnessed the person's new found faith and healing recognized a threat in worship! At that very hour, these leaders were threatened. The world had been brought into the worship service. The realities of brokenness, barrenness, being beaten down and abused were right in front of the service and they had to be dealt with. The Pharisees turned to the law! They said, it is illegal! It violates our traditions! It is not sanctioned by God!

When those arguments didn't work, they turned to a worldly authority! They threatened Jesus at the very time he offered a solution to the world's problems they were unwilling to offer! They tried to scare Him by saying that someone He would have surely been in awe of was concerned regarding his actions!

Doesn't this happen in worship all the time? We see someone who raises their hands during praise and worship, or claps during a song, or says "Amen" during a sermon and we look at them with that sideways glance that says, we don't do that here. Someone comes into our congregation at the end of worship looking for a cup of coffee and a warm dry place and we wonder how much money they are going to ask for. Someone gets into trouble during the week and then shows up at church on Sunday and we wonder why they have chosen to come to this place!

We don't want the world to come to our service! We don't want the world to remind us of its brokenness, of its beatings and its abuse. We don't want the world to be made well because we might then recognize that it is not the world but our faith that is lacking. We might then recognize that it is our hurt that is neglected because we are unwilling to come to worship and lay our inner most thoughts before God! We might recognize, as the Pharisees do that there is more than one way to worship and the way we worship is only effective if it is authentic! Look at the Genesis passage for this morning. Abram slept through the service, but he slept in the Lord! I know some of you recognize this as worship...I see you sleeping during our service!

At that very hour when the Pharisees confront Jesus, we are confronted! Are we willing to be scared off, or will we follow the footsteps of Jesus. Look at his response. "Tell that fox, Look! I am here!" What he means is that Herod or anyone for that matter, knows where to find him! Jesus does not do his ministry in secret. He does not work behind closed doors. He is in plain sight for anyone who will seek him out to see. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to go into hiding, to become only an enigma, or even a figment of the imagination of the people to whom He was sent.

Jesus response is the same as it is in chapter 4. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring the good news, to heal the sick, to make the lame to walk, to make the blind to see and even to raise some from the dead he says! That is what He is really saying. Go and tell! Let Herod know I am right here doing what I have been commissioned to do! Let the world know I am in plain sight and if they look, they can find me, if they knock the door will be opened.

Following in Jesus footsteps in worship can be intimidating. We do not always want our worship to be public, to be practiced in the world, and we certainly don't want the world to be brought to us with its reminders of brokenness and abuse, but if we are to make this journey, this is the path we are called to follow! For Jesus, worship and life must intersect. His footsteps lead right through the best and worst of our lives and remind us that He does not exist as an enigma or a figment, but as an ever present reality of the Love God wants to share with us!

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, How I have Longed to gather your children...but you were not willing. We couldn't find the thirty second sound bite in the Hebrew Bible lesson. It was buried under layers of effort on God's part to continue to invite us to the Good News through faith. Time and time again, God called, God calls still. Here it is just layed out! I have longed for you, been available for you, desired relationship with you and I have been right there for you...in plain sight...but you did not knock, you did not seek and YOU DID NOT FIND! You were not willing!

Jerusalem means "City of Peace, Shalom." God's shalom, God's covenant means there is nothing missing, nothing broken. God has desired to bring us into this kind of relationship. In the synagogue with Jesus today, God has called out to us. He has said, I am here! Come to me! I want to gather you as a mother hen gathers her brood.

It is interesting that Jesus uses these words to illustrate His availability. Many have pointed to this passage as a place where Jesus reveals His feminine side. I wont argue against that. I do think Jesus has several nurturing and caring characteristics typical of a stereotypical woman, but I think Jesus pushes us beyond trying to divide between men and women, jews and Greeks, slaves and free! Jesus wants all of us to nurture one another. He wants all of us to be loving and caring, to follow in these footsteps as we practice ministry in the world. Our love is the common character that sets us as Christians apart from a world that has not yet experienced the full possibilities of the Good News!

Instead of seeking to divide ourselves by gender, I believe what Jesus is saying is in earlier reference to Herod. He called Herod a fox. Jesus is saying, "The fox is in the chicken house!" We know that can not end well! He is saying, the world is coming to worship! The world is looking for those who are believing in all I have come to be! The world is threatening the peace I offer! The world, beaten, broken, battered, bleeding is coming to church. ARE YOU WILLING!

Are you willing to pray when others do not? Are you willing to practice the "Ten Commandments" even when the words are removed from the walls of public places? Are you willing to speak out for the rights of all people to worship in ways they choose even when those ways differ from your ways? Are you willing to stand against abuse of other people when the majority of the world wants to keep silent? Are you willing to share your gifts and offerings without expecting anything in return? ARE YOU WILLING!

Jesus tells the Pharisees this morning, because you are not willing to allow for the possibilities of a love you cannot understand you will not see me. He doesn't say he will not be there, but He says "you will not see be," until the time has come for my full purpose to be revealed. The Hebrew people hearing the words of scripture today would have known exactly what He was saying! The words would have been very familiar to them.

Because we do not celebrate the “Jewish Seder” we may not know the words, “blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” are the very last words uttered at the end of the meal. All who are present leave singing hymns from the Psalms. Specifically they sing the “*Hymns of Hillel*” Psalms that invoke this very phrase! Jesus message was and is, “ I have fixed my eyes on Jerusalem, and I know it wont end well there for me, but I am the end of the Passover! I am the redemption of the world!”

It appears that Jesus has taken us to several places today. It appears He takes us to the synagogue where He heals, it appears He takes us to the city where He performs cures, it appears He has taken us to Jerusalem, but the reality is that Jesus has taken us to worship! He has never left the synagogue today. The reality is that the new synagogue, the new temple of worship is inside us! Just as it was with Abram as God led him, so it is with us! The one who redeems, the one who saves comes to us in worship and in us worship meets life!

Sometimes worship is messy, sometimes it is broken, sometimes it flows beautifully, but always it is intended to be authentic. Today, Jesus invites us to follow His footsteps as He takes worship to the world! He invites us to follow His footsteps as He brings the world to worship! The Apostle tells us in Philippians today that we are to stand firm in the cross, to not let other gods, the gods of distractions and jealousy overshadow our view of the path we have chosen. Jesus is present! Today, tomorrow and even in the completion of His work! He has come to bring the Good News and He has chosen us and His place of worship! From us others will learn that He will heal the sick, cure the lame, cause the blind to see, and yes, raise those who were in death in the world to eternal life. What a joy to follow in these footsteps! Amen!

Next Week: Scripture: Luke 13: 1-9. Message: *Following the Footsteps of Jesus to the Lakeshore.* This week we are nearly halfway through our journey! We come to the lakeshore and we hear of acts of terrorism and torture! In the 21st century these are all too common. What does Jesus have to say about them? What comfort can He bring to a people who have so much trouble getting along? Come and Worship! Come and See!