DAY BY DAY BY FAITH
Scripture: Luke 13:31-35

FOCUS: We are called, not to an easy life, rather called to live by faith day by day, trusting in the good times, the bad times and the ordinary times.

Earlier in Luke’s gospel, we find these words, ***“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem”.*** Jesus had a plan, more accurately God had a plan and Jesus knew his part. His earthly ministry was almost over, it would end once Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and he knew it. So he set off with his destination firmly in mind. He didn’t take the freeway. As was his habit, Jesus chose the scenic route, going through small towns, and villages, around the countryside, meandering as he journeyed, going where people were in need. In his last days, Jesus was still about his earthly mission of healing, of casting out demons, of spreading the gospel message of salvation and grace.

As we move toward the gospel text we have read we find Jesus has been teaching in the synagogue. He has left his wandering behind and arrived in Jerusalem. There he has reminded those who would listen the way to the kingdom is through a narrow door, narrow not because of any reluctance on God’s part, narrowed by humanity’s foolishness and rebellion, by a lack of faith. God’s most earnest desire is for all to make it into the kingdom, but we are created with free will, we can choose foolishness, and we often do as we rush with the crowds through the massive open door of conformity. Jesus knows all too well his is a message out of step with the world, a message of upside down priorities. What the world acclaims is popular but temporary. The alternative Jesus offers is marked by wonderfully difficult eternal truths. The way to gain life is to lose it, those who push and shove and climb seeking to be first will, in the end, be last, some of those the world considers unimportant will be the most important, some of those who proclaim most loudly their faithfulness have no faith at all.

Jesus concludes his teaching and something completely unexpected and remarkable happens. Some Pharisees, those who perhaps more than any other group are working to be rid of Jesus, warn him to get away because they have heard Herod is plotting to have Jesus killed. In the ivory towers of academia there is much speculation concerning motivation and the nature of the Pharisees interest in protecting Jesus from Herod. Not all Pharisees were evil as the church tends to paint them. It is quite possible there were those in their ranks who, despite their opposition to what Jesus was saying and doing, were not interested in seeing bloodshed and who sought to convince him to get away to a safe haven. It is possible these Pharisees simply wanted to avoid being caught up in a conflict between religious and secular factions and hoped Jesus would just go away and leave them and the rest of Jerusalem alone. It could even be the Pharisees who warned Jesus were his secret followers. After all Paul was a Pharisee and it would be Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who would help Joseph of Arimathea insure Jesus had a proper burial.

We don’t know why the Pharisees warned Jesus, but one thing for sure, when you begin to be warned of danger by your enemies, you can bet the danger is real. So it was for Jesus. But it was not his fate which made him sad that day, it wasn’t the thought of suffering which brought tears to his eyes. It was the lack of faith he witnessed among the people in the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus was especially fond of Jerusalem and of God’s chosen people who lived there. Not to say Jesus wasn’t or isn’t still fond of everyone, but those who attended temple in the magnificent structure upon which he gazed, those whose lives were woven around the rich history of the Hebrew people were special to Jesus, and especially disappointing was their foolish behavior. After all, they had every advantage. They had grown up hearing the prophecies, they had spent their whole lives following the laws of Moses, yet they had failed to get the picture. Though they had not personally killed prophets, those who inhabited Jerusalem were certainly guilty of tossing a few stones, both literally and figuratively at those who followed Jesus. And in Jerusalem many who claimed to be God fearing were living immorally, mistreating their sisters and brothers, ignoring the needs of their elders, chasing after pagan gods. It was enough to make Jesus’ heart ache.

Jesus’ response to the warning is swift and certain. He dismisses Herod’s threat. ***“Tell that fox that I don’t have time to fool with him right now.”*** He said.  ***“Tell him I’m too busy casting out demons and healing the sick to be bothered by his paranoia.”*** Jesus dismisses Herod’s threat, not because it is idle, not because it has no teeth, rather he dismisses it because his focus is not on the wills of the secular powers and authorities, no matter what they might do to him. Jesus is concerned with the needs of the people. Jesus is focused on the physical and spiritual brokenness which plagues those who live in the city he loves.

It is the privileged civic and religious leaders with whom Jesus most has issues, to whom he speaks the most significant challenges and for whom he has the harshest words. And it is for those who consider themselves to be on the side of all which is good, those who are active church folk, those who claim the name of God, he laments. It is for folks just like us who claim faithfulness, but who fail to fully follow the way of truth Jesus came to illuminate.

Jesus was warned of the consequences of his unrestrained honesty, but he didn’t need to be, he knew what lay before him. He had set his face toward his own end. He could have run, but to do so would have contradicted the will of God. He could have resisted, but to do so would have been counter everything he stood for. He could have simply bowed to the pressure of the power of the throne, but to do so would have been to deny who he was and what he was about. Jesus knew what lay before him in Jerusalem, but being faithful to the one who sent him to live among us, he resolutely set his face to go not just to Jerusalem but on to Calvary, because that was what he was called of God to do. What an example. An example we are called to follow. We generally know what we are called to be, in which direction we are called to walk, but knowing and acting are not always willing companions. It is up to us to set our faces toward the goal we have before us and to move ever forward no matter what challenges we face. We may be certain there will be challenges. Thankfully there are assurances as well.

We find an example in the Old Testament text we heard this morning. We are told that a godly vision came to Abram, the faithful servant who become Abraham. ***“Don’t be afraid, I’m your shield and you will reap your reward.”*** Abram was afraid, or at least he was worried, and are not the two often companions? He was facing the significant humiliation which was the lot of those who had no blood heir. His concern was reflected in his response as we find it in The Message ***“What use are your gifts as long as I am childless and my heir is to be my slave Eliezer.”*** The word of the Lord immediately came again to Abram. ***“This man shall not be your heir, no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.”*** Then Abram was led outside into the evening. The voice of God spoke again, ***“Look at the sky, count the stars, can you do it?”***  It was a rhetorical question and Abram knew it. After a brief pause to let the vastness of the heavens make an impression the voice again spoke. ***“Your descendants will be just as numerous.”*** Then comes this wonderfully simple declaration. ***“And Abram believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”***

Return with me now to Jerusalem. Jesus has been teaching in the temple and confronting the attitudes of the self-righteous religious leaders who are all wrapped up in their treaured legalism. They have once again condemned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus has been given that warning, told Herod is out to get him. He looks around, perhaps with tears in his eyes, at the city he loves, the city which ought to be most connected to God, the hometown of the chosen people. And he laments. What haunting words. ***“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills 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.”***

If Jesus were to set his face to come to Daleville, if he were to arrive one morning to gaze out on this congregation, to consider the example of your pastor, I wonder, would his heart ache? What would he have to say? The sins he would denounce would not be the murder of prophets or the stoning of those who spread the gospel message. But we are not off the hook. We all, at times, make Jesus’ heart heavy. We don’t do it intentionally, we don’t seek to disappoint him, we simply fail to be all we can be, we fail to remain faithful.

Remember, it was not the political powers for whom Jesus had the harshest words, it was not all those outside the fold he most often called to accountability, it was the religious insiders. I suspect that were he to appear here in the Wiregrass in 2016 Jesus would first visit the churches, just as was his habit to go first to the temple when in Jerusalem. He might come longing to find an ever faithful people. He would come knowing that such is not possible on this earth and he would come bringing challenging words and a rebuke or two. Thankfully, he would also come bearing the good news that God seeks to take us under God’s wing and to lead us, by faith, into vital, active ministry.

We, like many of the folks in Jerusalem long ago, are at times too busy making our own plans, doing our own things, designing our own programs, maintaining the status quo. Distracted, we unintentionally, often unknowingly, set our faces in the wrong direction. We have plenty of excuses. Life is hard and I must take care of myself. I have responsibilities and just can’t’ take on anything more. You just don’t know all I am dealing with, I’m discouraged and frankly wonder if God has forgotten me. Why me, Lord? Natural reactions all, reactions most of us have had somewhere along the line. And we are not alone. The Psalter is full of laments, many written by David. Paul found himself in prison, Stephen was stoned to death. Many of those paragons of the faith we most admire suffered. And they have all doubted. We see that in the reaction of Abram in our Old Testament text. He clearly heard the voice of God, but couldn’t believe what he heard. He questioned God, and that was quite acceptable.

It wasn’t the first time Abram had encountered an odd calling. It surely was not the first time he questioned. But like all the other times, after the questions were asked, Abram had faith. He trusted that God would take him under God’s wing. It was by faith that Abram became Abraham, the father of a nation and a faith. But the journey was not easy. We read of it in Hebrews where Paul writes. ***“By an act of faith, Abraham said yes to God’s call to travel to an unknown place that would become his home. When he left he had no idea where he was going. By an act of faith he lived in the country promised him, lived as a stranger camping in tents. Isaac and Jacob did the same, living under the same promise. Abraham did it by keeping his eye on an unseen city with real, eternal foundations—the City designed and built by God. By faith, barren Sarah was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said. That’s how it happened that from one man’s dead and shriveled loins there are now people numbering into the millions.”***

It was by faith, day by day, that Abram lived into the ministry and witness of Abraham. It was faith which was missing among those who were heavy on Jesus’ heart. They had all the advantages, had heard all the stories, knew all the scriptures, had witnessed, or at least heard of, the miracles of healing and wholeness, but they had lost focus, allowed the daily struggles to cloud their judgement and they were setting their faces in the wrong direction.

The voice of God calls each of us to redemptive ministry, challenges us to spread the good news, to share the grace of God and the power of Jesus in all that we say and do. We are not sent out on our own, left to our own devices. God seeks to take each of us as individuals and our collective family of faith under God’s wing, to nurture to protect and to mentor us. But we are often too busy running around, making our own plans, plotting our own courses to simply hunker down under the protective wings of God’s will for our lives. And God looks down and says John, John, and God speaks my sin to me. You who are not always compassionate when compassion is called for, you who fail to have patience when patience and kindness are supposed to be the fruits of the Spirit filled life, how often I have sought to take you under my wing, but you have been too stubborn, too self-centered and you have turned away.

The season of Lent calls for honest assessment, for some deep pondering, for hard but productive reflection and introspection. We are called in these days to honestly face our sin and brokenness. But simply taking stock is not enough. Having made the assessment we are called to move forward, to put behind us the baggage we all carry, to learn from, but not dwell on, our mistakes, our failures, our past sin. Then we are called to repent and to be transformed into more complete reflections of the life of the one who resolutely made his way to Jerusalem despite knowing how things would end up.

The journey will not always be easy, we will be tempted to turn our eyes, maybe even to close them. But like Abram, we must move ever forward, even when we are not sure where we are going. I encountered these words from parenting author L.R. Knost as I was working on the sermon this week. Her words speak to all of us, parents or not. ***“Life is amazing. And then it’s awful. And then it’s amazing again. And in between the amazing and the awful it’s ordinary and mundane and routine. Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That’s just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life. And it’s breathtakingly beautiful.”***

It is especially so when we live by faith, day by day, trusting God and shining the light of God’s Spirit in all that we do and say. As we travel through these holy days, may we set our face to go to our own Jerusalem, our own holy place, trusting that when the trials come there is one who will gather us under his wing, committing to respond to his grace living gracefully. For your sake, for the sake of a world which often has its face set in the wrong direction, and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who yearns to take us all under his wing, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and o the Holy Spirit, AMEN.