As I mentioned in the e-newsletter that many of you read this week, Lent is not my favorite season of the Christian year. First, it falls at time when it is typically dark and dreary outside. The weather often matches our Christian season - a time of darkness, reflection on the impending sacrifice of Jesus' painful death on the cross. But like winter turning to spring, we have hope following Christ's death, the hope of Easter morning! In the meantime, as we prepare for that glorious day, we reflect...and wait...and hope.

Today's gospel reading comes from Luke 13:31-35 and begins with a warning to Jesus from the Pharisees regarding Herod's plans to kill him. Now remember the Pharisees were religious leaders of the day; they were legalistic in their thinking. Some might call them plebe summer detailers. They were more concerned with outward appearances than issues of the heart and faith. And Jesus strongly challenged this line of thinking. As you can imagine, this did not go over well with the Pharisees. There were a few exceptions, but for the most part, their relationship was antagonistic. Considering this background, it's difficult to speculate on their motives at this point, but for whatever reason, the Pharisees came to Jesus telling him, "Hey you need to get out of here; this place isn't safe for you anymore."

Maybe you've heard warnings like this. You don't like the way certain people in the company you work for are being treated. You think about reporting it, but more experienced voices in the company say "Don't go there." Maybe you have inside knowledge of corruption and if you blow the whistle, everyone's going to know who snitched and it's going to get ugly. Those you think you trust say, "Just go with the flow. You don't want you and your family to get hung up in that." Or maybe you're passing through the p-way in Bancroft and someone in your company is being made fun of. His or her weaknesses are showing and you notice they're not handling it very well. You decide to reach out and be a friend but other people in your company say "Don't hang out with that person. You'll get rejected too." It's hard to do the right thing when you might have to pay a high price for it.

As a Navy chaplain, part of my job is to advise my chain of command. There have been times when I've given my command a "head's up," hoping to avoid a landmine. So I can imagine how Jesus' disciples felt when they heard this warning. They knew that Herod already killed John the Baptist. "Come on Teacher; let's roll on out of here. This is volatile; this could cost us our lives." Here's Jesus' response, are you ready for this? Jesus said, "Tell that fox (tricky politician) that I've no time for him right now. I'm
busy.” What?! Are you kidding me? Not only are you not running or hiding, Jesus, it's like you're poking the proverbial hornet's nest.

Once we get passed what seems to his reckless abandon, we recognize that Jesus was very much in control of his own destiny. He was not going to be rushed. He knew what he had to do, where it had to happen, and he prepared for it. The message translation of verse 32 says, "I'm wrapping things up." The New International Version says, "I will reach my goal." There's almost an element of him choreographing this event. The main theological point here is that Jesus went to the cross, not “volun-told” as we say in the military, but voluntarily, willingly. There are other times when Jesus is threatened but he sneaks away. It's not the right time or place. Jesus knows the when and he's not going to have some immoral, evil "fox" mess up the schedule. He was faithful and obedient to God the Father's plan.

How many of us are willing to do what God calls us to do? Isn't it true that we often reinterpret the will of God so that it fits more comfortably with our spirituality? We squirm under the very thought of facing opposition, rejection and ridicule. So we define for ourselves a notion of faithfulness that will not seriously put us at odds with the expectations of our culture. And you know what the uncomfortable truth is? Our Lord expects better from us.

In the historically based movie Braveheart, William Wallace rallies the people of medieval Scotland to fight for freedom against the oppressive and much more powerful forces of England. The Scottish nobles want to negotiate with the English because they fear for their lives. Wallace, challenging them to stand firm, declares, "All men die but not all truly live." This is at the heart of where Jesus was heading.

Do we really want to live as Christ followers? Or are we content with having a relationship with The Lord only when it's convenient? Jesus never suggested that he would be content with our spare time or spare energy or spare change. He set no limits on the loyalty he expected, no constraints on the commitment he required. He not only insisted that his followers be 100% devoted to him, he also told them that they should expect to suffer for that devotion.

Moving on to verse 34, we hear the emotion behind Jesus' words: 34 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. 35 Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

If you ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' sorrow. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make someone walk into them. Interesting note: this posture is the most vulnerable in the world. Completely exposed. It's also interesting that Jesus chose a hen to describe himself. Not an eagle who can soar, not a lion, but a vulnerable hen who desires to gather
her chicks beneath her wings. What a tender image of love, especially when we consider her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he'll have to kill her first. Which he does, as it turns out.

This passage clearly tells us that the motive behind Jesus calling to a higher standard stems from his great love for each one of us. He is deeply devoted and concerned for his people; he wants better for us. Here’s the reality: Jesus gave his life for us so we can live eternally with him when we accept that gift. But it’s also about the here and now. Jesus said in this world we will have trouble, but take heart because he has overcome the world. We are not just left out here on our own to tough it out and try to do the right thing. Having a relationship with God through Jesus Christ means being equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit to walk according to God’s standards, which are ultimately for our own good.

Throughout Lent, we have been preparing ourselves to experience Jesus' sacrifice. This passage challenges us to consider whether our lives lead appropriately to that cross. Can we make sense of our lives as they relate to God's kingdom in our world? Or are we frightened from our mission by the threats of earthly rulers?

Let us pray: Good and gracious, wise and all-knowing God, help us beyond what is keeping us from living fully in your will. Much like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, we choose to live in bondage rather than put ourselves at risk. We know making choices that honor you will often cost us. Give us courage, we pray, as we seek your guidance and protection. In the precious name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.