

March Remarks from Our Pastors

In their reports to Council each month, Pastor Gregg and Pastor Rachel conclude with some personal remarks that summarize the most recent period of their leadership here at Grace.

Senior Pastor's Remarks:

If you look at the Gospel text for the Second Sunday in Lent ([Luke 13:31-35](#)), you'll see a curious phrase. The Pharisees are warning Jesus that his ministry is rubbing some people the wrong way. His work, though appreciated by many, is not so appreciated by Herod, the puppet king. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "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.'"

We might think Jesus is extending at least a subtle nod to the cleverness of Herod here, but the opposite is likely true. In an agrarian context, foxes might well be clever, but they are primarily thought of as destructive. Their clever nature only causes havoc for everybody else. Foxes were – to borrow a favorite phrase from Yosemite Sam – varmint.

Assuming that the Pharisees are here being good natured, we might wonder to ourselves whether Jesus is being antagonistic in this passage. Herod might be a varmint king, but is it wise to say so out loud? Indeed, later, when the determination is made that Jesus is too great a problem to be left unattended, statements like this one were likely considered by the religious and political figures in power.

There are times when, faced with challenging situations, we are all tempted to be a little careful with our words. We might have a boss with a short fuse, or a family member with a sensitive ear. It may be prudent to adjust our phrasing a bit in these circumstances, but one of the lessons from this passage is: it depends on the subject. Can one be 'nice' to Herod? Certainly. Ought one be 'subject' to Herod? Sure, unless one is ready to fight him for his makeshift throne. But is the approach to ministry altered by Herod's sensitivities? No. And facing that very decision, Jesus makes plain his intention to continue doing God's work, freeing God's people from their demons and diseases, regardless of the cost. He further reminds the Pharisees who approach him with this idea: remember who Herod really is, friends.

Herod Antipas has been on the throne for some time. He is not as brutal as his brother Archelaus, but he is not a good man. This is the same Herod who married his brother's wife and claimed the head of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Herod Antipas is the one who preserves the Roman 'peace' by agreeing to rule in a manner favorable to the conquering nation. With Herod in place, the borders of Rome are extended, but not the headaches of ruling a nation so far from the seat of Roman power. This arrangement seems to work for a little while. But Jesus knows the nature of tyrants; they take more than their share and never seem content. They get in their own way, like Herod did in executing the popular baptizer. And besides, Jesus knows very well that his death can't come outside of Jerusalem – he is relatively safe from Herod while he is still passing through town, since it is not the rejection of Herod alone that will seal his earthly fate. More people will come to despise this radical rabbi before the end has come.

All this makes for a bit of a gloomy lesson, or it would be gloomy, except for the brazen nature of Jesus. He is fully aware of who has the power and what they will do with it. He knows that it isn't enough to upset the government alone; he still needs to offend the religious authorities, and he isn't quite done with that part yet. But what is the offense? He heals. He exorcises. He teaches love and acceptance of others. Unlike so many politicians and public preachers, Jesus does not create scapegoats and in so doing, he becomes one. But Jesus is not fooled, not for one second of this story. He is willing to endure what will come to him, even though it will mean his own death.

As we make our way through this Lenten journey, look out for the ways in which you see these things taking place. I am referring to our reading of Scripture *and* our life together, here and now. Where do you notice Jesus being an unflinching leader, even when others begin to distrust his way, his movement? Apply that question to your reading of the text.

Apply it to your living of these forty days. A great deal can be learned as we appreciate the tenacity of our peaceful Lord. God willing, the more we see of him in this way, the closer we draw near to him. And his cross.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor's Remarks:

Philippians 3:20—4:1

²⁰[Brothers and sisters] our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. ^{4:1}Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for,

my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

This week marks the five-year anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic and the beginning of the lockdowns. It somehow feels so long ago, and still so recent, at least to me. Our first virtual worship service happened on March 15th, and the church office moved to work-from-home on March 18th. At that time, we did not know what was coming. We thought we'd be back for Easter (we were not). And in the weeks that followed, I could not imagine what the world would be like in a few months, much less five years. I wanted information that we simply did not have, a crystal ball to say how things would turn out, but of course, no one could know. I was afraid.

What I see, five years later, is that while many things happened and many things changed, the center of who we are at Grace continues to hold strong. We are God's people in this place, called to share the gospel on this corner and in this community. We are still grounded in Campus Ministry, in community building, in worship, in welcome, in service, in faith. How we do those things has changed a bit – we have a different Campus Minister, we changed our Outreach program, we added online worship – but that's how life is. Something is always changing. We get to determine if we use those changes for good.

We get to decide if we hold fast to our faith, continue to commit to God's call, stay in community and support one another. And with God's help, we've done that.

At this five-year mark, I wonder - what will things look like in another five years? There is upheaval in the world right now that I could not have imagined 5 years ago. Basic rights are in question. Fiction and opinion are presented as fact. Structures we counted on to safeguard our health, our education, our elderly, our at-risk neighbors are being threatened. The rhetoric of dehumanizing and other-ing is reaching a level I cannot remember existing in my lifetime. And the world has been painted so black and white that the grey of nuance is forgotten; we are being told to pick one side or the other and stay there, defending our position come what may. I want to know how things will turn out. At times, I am still afraid.

The Philippians reading for this Sunday reminds me that I do not need to fear. We are *in* this world, but we are not *of* it. "Our citizenship is in heaven." This does not mean that we block out what's happening; it means we can endure it, we can trust in our Savior to work within the upheaval, and - more importantly - within us. Jesus can transform the humiliation of this world into glory, and in the end, he will. With that good news in our hearts, we can stand firm in the Lord. We can stand firm in our call to be God's people, right where we are, bringing the good news of the gospel to others. We can continue in faith, in service, in welcome, in worship, in Campus Ministry, and in all things, we can point to Christ. Christ is stronger than all oppression or fear. He calls us to community, to dwell with each other, to consider the nuance of life together.

That call does not change, regardless of pandemics, disasters, crises, or transitions of any kind.

With that in mind, wondering about the next five years is a little less uncertain. The specific details of the coming years none of us can predict. But what I do know, and do hold on to, is that in five years, we will still have to choose how to approach the coming changes, working for the good, and if we will hold fast to our faith. And if these five years have shown me anything, it's that in five years, the Grace family will still be God's people in this place. Jesus will still be here, calling God's people to the work in this community. And in all of it, God's glory will shine.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel