***“Under His Wing”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, 3-17-19

**Luke 13:1–5, 31–35**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you. . . .”

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, ‘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 away from Jerusalem.’ 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!”

I think what lies behind these passages is really the question: What is God like? Is God constantly ready to punish, to scold, to make people “pay”? Does God take revenge on people for things they’ve done? These are the implied ideas behind the question about whether some Galileans *deserved* what happened to them, and whether some victims of an accident deserved what happened to *them*.

Jesus insists that atrocities, like Pilate’s murders, and accidents, like the tower collapse, are *not* God’s punishment. The victims were notworse sinners than others, just because these horrible things happened to them. Misfortune is *not* God’s punishment, nor does God teach through violence. When people suffer accidents, it is not a message from God. When people are born with birth defects, this is not retaliation from God, or even karma. There really are unfortunate events, diseases, and defects that are unrelated to sin, just as there are terrible accidents and acts of nature that are not sent by God. They simply happen.

The business of learning through experience is a necessary one, but God does not try to shame or bludgeon us into learning. Life sometimes sends painful experiences our way, but what *life* sends us is not necessarily something sent by *God*. God seeks to guide us, and does not give us a stone if we ask for bread (Matt 7:9).

Now, of course, there are terrible events that are human-caused. The tetrarch, or governor, Herod was the cause of many such injustices, and in the second reading Jesus calls him a “fox.” Jesus then goes on to talk about finishing his work. He is foretelling his own death. He laments that Jerusalem keeps killing the prophets, referring to the tradition about the murder of Isaiah and of a priest named Zechariah who was functioning as a prophet when he was killed (Luke 11:50–51).

So Jesus is here anticipating his coming death. But notice what he says! He does *not* say that he is going to die for people’s sins. On the contrary, he links his coming death with the deaths of the prophets, implying that *any* true prophet is destined to be persecuted in Jerusalem. He is observing how horribly true prophets are often treated. He does *not* say that he must die to make salvation available. There is nothing here about God requiring a victim for human sin, or about an innocent death having magical saving power.

Rather his death is another human-caused evil, like the killing of the prophets, that was not meant to happen. It was *not* planned by God. Jesus mourns over Jerusalem because he sees that they have thwarted his plan for them. *He* certainly didn’t think that he had to be killed, and it breaks his heart that the leaders of his people are willing to hand him over to violence. If Jesus thought he was predestined to be killed, he would not have cried real tears over what Jerusalem was doing.

He was wishing that he could have become a father figure for his people, that he could take the Jewish people under his wing and lead them into a new age, but the priests and many of the Pharisees would not allow it. They felt threatened by him. But Jesus lets us see his own plan here. He *would* have become their spiritual leader and protector. Instead, God’s will was thwarted, as it *often* is by evildoers. People can rebel and can delay God’s plan.

Jesus was not sent to be killed. His sorrow over Jerusalem, his regret that he could not take them under his wing, would make no sense if he was sent to be killed. Rather, he was sent to be the spiritual teacher and leader of humanity. In fact, he *is* the spiritual leader of humanity, although not everyone has recognized and accepted him as such.

Someday, all humanity will recognize the Son of Man as their true spiritual leader. His hope was to lead the Jews to become evangelists of the truth about God to all humanity. And it certainly would be a very different world today if Jesus had been allowed to finish his spiritual mission. Imagine just how different the world would be if Jesus had been accepted! Imagine him being received as spiritual leader. All other human beings who could be called “spiritual leader” pale in comparison. And yet, it does raise for us the concept of spiritual leader, and I want to look at that.

The image of a spiritual father figure and leader of a nation summons up for me the image of St. Patrick, who came to be seen as a father figure for the Irish people. Now here is the first amazing fact—Patrick was not Irish, he was English. Shocking but true!

The story takes place in the 5th century. Patrick was sixteen years old when he was captured by Irish pirates and brought to Ireland to serve as a slave. He tended animals for six years before he was able to escape and return to England. There, he became a churchman, and was in conversation with church leaders. Finally, he returned to Ireland to try to win some converts. The story of his life has some legendary elements to it, but it seems clear that his mission was a great success; he curtailed the power of the Druids and gained many converts, although church legend is probably exaggerating when it pictures him as the spiritual leader of the whole nation.

The story of him driving the snakes out of Ireland is certainly legend. Scientists say there have been no snakes in Ireland since the end of the last Ice Age. The snakes are really a metaphor for the Druids, whose hold over the people he seems to have broken by confronting them, lighting a bonfire on Easter when it was forbidden by Druid regulations.

It is said that he used the shamrock as an illustration of the Trinity. He held up one blade of this grass and showed that it had three leaves, and yet it was a unity, a single blade.

To conclude, I want to say something about what defines spiritual leaders. A Christian leader needs to always be a learner, to perpetually learn from Jesus, and to better follow God’s will. A servant is not above his master, and we must always learn from the Master. We also need to look to God’s way of teaching and guiding, which is never through violence, nor through sacrificial death, nor through giving us a stone if we ask for bread. Despite what some people have thought, God is not cruel. He does not topple towers on us, or aid dictators in the horrible things they do. *We* need to stop the dictators; God doesn’t do that for us. And we need compassion, so we can minister to those whom life injures.