

Title: Escape

Date: February 28, 2010 (Lent 2)

Texts: Ps 27, Philip 3:17-4:1, Lk 13:31-35

The Pharisees want what's good for Jesus. They respect his ministry and want him to survive. These Pharisees may even consider Jesus a friend of their own ministry. So, according to Luke's Gospel, "some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you'" (Lk. 13:31). Jesus hears their warning, but doesn't change his plans. He knows the path he must follow. And he refuses to let Herod's plans mess with what God wants him to do.

Let me make an observation before we get into the thick of it. It's interesting, at least to me, that the Pharisees know people on the inside of power. They are connected. They have ears to hear the secrets of the powerful, the rumors about Herod's plans. They have their finger on the pulse of power. And Jesus does not. He depends on the Pharisees for news about Herod. The Pharisees pass on their information to Jesus, and then Jesus treats the Pharisees as if they were messengers of Herod: "Go," Jesus says, "and tell that fox for me..." (v. 32). They aren't followers of Jesus; instead they set their course by the bad news coming from Herod.

But all of that may not be too important for our reading today. What's more important is that we see how the Pharisees continue the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. We heard that story last week. The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil for forty days. He is tempted to choose a different path to get what he wants without having to live a human life and die a human death. He is tempted to choose an easy road, instead of the path that leads to the cross. The devil would give Jesus the power over the kingdoms of the world in an instant. Jesus would be able to establish the kingdom of heaven without having to go through the troubles of his life. The devil tempted him with a shortcut to the throne of heaven—a chance to take control of the nations, to set the world free from the devil's dominion, and establish justice and peace... heaven on earth.

Now, in our passage for today, the Pharisees tempt Jesus again with a chance to escape, to escape Herod's secret plot to kill him. "Get away from here," the Pharisees say, "for Herod wants to kill you" (v. 31). But Jesus refuses to change his path. He knows the road he must take—to Jerusalem. And no temptation, no offer of security, no warning to escape, will cause him to swerve from that path, from the leading of the Holy Spirit.

We all face temptations of escape. They probably aren't as stark as the one Jesus faced. I don't imagine you've heard rumors that someone will kill you if you don't stop doing what you are doing. Our escapes are not so drastic. We find everyday kinds of escapes, some of which may not be so bad; some may even be good for us, like a nap or a daydream, a novel or a movie—a time to let our minds wander, to let ourselves rest, to step away from our routines, so we can return to our lives with new eyes, rejuvenated and rested.

The Sabbath may be that kind of ordinary escape from our weekly routine, from the daily grind—a needed stop so we can simply be where we are, more fully, more

deeply, more present. But there is another kind of escape that is a subtle “no” to the good news God is working through our lives. This is the temptation Jesus faces in our story: the temptation to give up on God’s plan, to run and hide from the world out of fear, to escape from the costs of his mission.

We want to escape too. We are restless, easily bored, and hungry for excitement; we are taught to desire a life that is not our own—to have a more prestigious job or to become a beautiful celebrity, I’m sure you have your favorite: Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp, Jennifer Aniston or Reese Witherspoon—probably not Tiger Woods or Lindsay Lohan. We want to be who we are not, to inhabit a life that is not our own, to become voyeurs and avatars—to imagine our way into the life of someone else and slowly to give up on our own, or at least to give up on the goodness and possibility of the gift of our own life. This isn’t simply about role-playing video games—like SimCity, which I used to play for countless hours in high school so I could ignore the powerlessness of my own life. In SimCity, I had the power to build cities, the power over countless virtual lives, the power to rule my virtual city, when in reality my parents wouldn’t let me stay out with my friends past 10pm. It was an escape.

We are restless—in a constant frenzy of innovation, always on the move, reaching beyond our limits, our desires are never satisfied.¹ In their *Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels prophesied an age of “everlasting uncertainty and agitation.”² We are caught up in a whirlwind, “swept up...[and] at once driven and aimless.”³ We are impatient and bored, agitated yet aimless. In such a world, it’s easy to let fantasies of heaven become an escape. Work hard now, slog it through life now, choose the path of suffering now, because heaven is our escape and will make everything worth it. Life is tolerable because we can hold onto our fantasies of heaven, of a future rest, a repose, stillness, a state of quiet forgetfulness—like an long weekend, an eternal weekend, one where we don’t have to be troubled with thought of work on Monday, or Tuesday, or forever.

The danger is that we may begin to live for the escapes. We grit our teeth and try to make it to the weekend, or to happy hour. I’ve had jobs like that. The trouble is that we close ourselves off to the ordinary gifts of life, the mundane pleasures, the usually unremarkable delights and goodness happening all around us and in us, sometimes even in spite of ourselves. If we live for escapes, we slowly lose our ability to say thank you to God for the life we have, for the gifts that sustain us. We slowly dull our senses of gratitude and become unable to receive joyfully everyday graces.

I’m struck by the last few lines of Psalm 27: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let

¹ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008): “the constrained frenzy of the West—our restless demand for action, change, innovation, intervention, and a systemic transgression of limits” (138).

² Harrison, 150.

³ *Ibid.*

your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" (Ps. 27:13-14). *The goodness of the Lord in the land of the living*. God's goodness is available. It's not only a heavenly reality, an experience we can have after we escape from this world. The goodness of the Lord is for the living, for us. It's always already here, predating us and anticipating us—the goodness of God makes room for us. God welcomes us with goodness. We live by grace.

The apostle Paul tells us that we are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). I don't think this means that we belong in heaven only after we die, once we've escaped this life and can enter into another. Our citizenship has already taken place; we have already been made citizens of heaven. We live that life now; we represent that place as we go about our days on earth. God makes heaven present on earth through us. Heaven isn't an escape; instead, it's the mission of God's love working itself out through us. We don't have to be restless and aimless because God has put us where we are as agents of grace, as citizens of heaven, as people who welcome God's goodness with gratitude. Instead of looking for escapes, we look for God's grace in our lives and learn how to say thank you. Our gratitude is how we welcome God in our midst; it's how we welcome heaven on earth; it's our witness to a frenzied world that God's presence is always around us and working through us. Gratitude helps us re-imagine our world as fertile soil for God to plant the tree of life that bears the fruit of heaven.

I heard Wendell Berry read a poem this past week and there's a line or two that says all of this better than I can:

...Heaven enough for me / would be this world as I know it, but redeemed / of our abuse of it and one another. It would be / the Heaven of knowing again... I would like to know / my children again, all my family, all my dear ones, / to see, to hear, to hold, more carefully / than before, to study them lingeringly as one / studies old verses, committing them to heart / forever...⁴

He goes on to talk about "the Heaven of my earthly love." Heaven isn't an escape from the world. It's this world redeemed and renewed—"redeemed of our abuse of [our creation] and one another."

This season of Lent is a time for paying attention to our lives, of looking for all the ways we try to escape, of all the ways we become numb to the everyday graces of God's goodness. As Christians, we don't escape; instead we wait and watch and give thanks. "Wait for the Lord," the Psalmist says, "be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" And, somehow, we hope that through our waiting, through our gratitude for what we receive from God, our friends and co-workers and neighbors may see heaven in our lives and say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Lk. 13:35).

⁴ Wendell Berry, *Leavings: Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 72-73.