

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*March 13, 2022*

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## **Surrounded by Enemies**

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text today comes at the end of a rather difficult chapter in Luke. It started off with the warning to repent or perish, then we have the ambiguous parable of the barren fig tree, followed by Jesus getting in trouble for healing a woman on the Sabbath. From there he shares two parables about how easy it seems to be to overlook the presence of the kingdom of God and then he offers a confusing teaching about a narrow door who very few will enter, but at the same time people from North, South, East, and West will be feasting in the kingdom of God.

The main constant of this stretch of Luke's Gospel appears to be conflict. By this point in Luke, it seems as though Jesus is antagonizing just about everyone. It's almost as though we're seeing what he prophesied in the previous chapter coming to fruition already. In Luke 12:51-52 we read Jesus saying this, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three." I don't know about the personal households at the time, but the household of Israel certainly seems divided by Jesus' actions and teachings.

We could find it surprising that the Pharisees approach Jesus with the warning of Herod's intentions. After all, there is no love lost between Jesus and the Pharisees. But perhaps they were hoping to kill two birds with one stone. By warning him maybe they thought they could ease his attacks on their piety while at the same time getting him to leave the area. The only problem with that strategy is that Jesus doesn't care one whit about "that fox" Herod's desire to see him dead.

Despite the possible double-dealing motives, it's still interesting to me to see the Pharisees trying to warn him about this threat. This got me to thinking about the various people and groups that Jesus antagonizes during his time

on earth. Our text today lifts up two of them: the Pharisees and Herod. But there are plenty of others! Just in Luke's Gospel we could add these others to the list: the Sadducees, the elders, the chief priests, the scribes, the temple police, Pilate, the Roman soldiers, and at the end, even the crowds. Jesus seems to be an equal opportunity antagonist!

This should come as absolutely no surprise given how Luke's Gospel starts. I've pointed out to you before the juxtaposition Luke uses in the first couple of chapters between the great and glorious Roman Emperor and lowly Mary and Joseph. Then we have the Magnificat, that beautiful poem inspired by the Holy Spirit that also illustrates the sort of person Mary's child, God's only Son, will be. The sort that turns the world upside down!

We may not even realize the full extent of Jesus' antagonism since we are so far removed from that time and culture. But to give you a little insight, let's examine some of these players and how Jesus antagonizes them. We'll start with the Pharisees since they appeared in our reading today. The Pharisees are one of the precursors to what will eventually become Rabbinical Judaism.

The origins of the Pharisee movement seem to be grounded in the Babylonian exile. Once the Temple was destroyed, along with much of the artifacts and scrolls it contained; a group of priests set about putting together what will eventually become the Hebrew Bible. The Temple will be rebuilt by Cyrus the Great which leaves a bad taste in many Israelite's mouths. So, we have a group of priests who have sort of "re-discovered" the Torah and the teachings of the prophets, along with a Temple whose sanctity is in doubt because of foreign influence. Out of this situation arises the Pharisees who reject much of the Temple/sacrifice system and begin to teach their own, strict interpretation of the Torah that was heavily focused on purity. Depending on your point of view they were either traditionalists, wanting to focus on the Torah, or anti-traditionalists, rejecting the Temple system that had been in place for centuries.

Then there's Herod. We don't need to spend as much time on him as his story is a common one for rulers of his time. He was a corrupt, puppet-king who had to bend to the will of Rome. But so long as Rome got its taxes Herod was relatively free to exercise his will in his kingdom however he liked. He got in some trouble with John the Baptist over his coveting his brother's wife, Herodias. In chapter 23 when Jesus appears before him, Herod will mock him and have him beaten when Jesus refuses to perform a sign for him.

So, in our reading alone we have enemies arrayed against Jesus that represent political power on one hand, and reforming religious power on the other. But wait, there's more! Jesus also antagonizes the chief priests, scribes, and Sadducees who represent the established, traditional religious power. Now perhaps Jesus doesn't directly antagonize Pilate in Luke's version of his trial, but he also seems uninterested in engaging with him at all. The other Gospels, John in particular, bear witness to tension between Jesus and Pilate. But I am confident in saying that Jesus has little interest in supporting the Roman Empire.

I guess what I'm trying to point out is the breadth of the enemies facing Jesus. They represent a wide variety of perspectives and agendas. And there are likely some elements in what they have to say that Jesus may have even agreed with. But there is one common thread amongst them all that, I believe, leads to Jesus' antagonism towards them, that is, the exercise of power over others.

Each of these groups enjoyed elevated status in the society of the time. Each of these groups had power over others, some even had the power of life and death over others. And, as has been proven true through all of human history, power tends to corrupt those who wield it. Each of these groups not only had power over others, but they were all perfectly willing to wield that power in terrible ways. The Temple system had perfected the art of fleecing people who were trying to offer sacrifices there. The Pharisees, and other groups, were so focused on purity that they happily judged others and shunned those who were less pure than they. Historical records indicate the Pilate will eventually be removed as governor because he was a little too violent (which is saying something for the Roman Empire) and caused several revolts due to his abuse of power.

In response to all of this power arrayed against him: political power, established religious power, reforming religious power, law enforcement, and even the fickle crowds; what image does Jesus draw on? A mother hen trying to gather her wayward chicks and protect them. Protect them from what? Well, if you've ever watched baby chicks, you'll know it's to protect them from outside threats, sure; but it's also to protect them from themselves. Baby chicks, after all, are none too bright and will happily walk right into a pit full of snakes.

What Luke is making clear to us is that God is concerned with saving us from all threats, including ourselves. God knows that left to our own devices we will

scatter and run away from God. We will be perfectly content to “wander off to find where demons dwell” in the words of that beloved Ylvisaker song. Or, perhaps even worse, we become the demons, seeking to harm our fellow baby chicks. We will array ourselves against God as so many did while Christ walked the dust of this earth.

God is always active. God is, right now, seeking to gather us up again. Trying to bring us under mothering wings that shield, comfort, warm, and accept us. Despite our best efforts to run away. Despite our thirst for power and opposition to the Way of Christ. Despite our harming others and the world God made; God **still** loves us! God still wants to gather us **all** into a loving embrace. Traditionalist, contemporary, powerful, meek, left, right, center, pacifist, soldier, Christian, atheist, none of that matters to God. God seeks to gather **us all**. God loves **us all**. And God invites us to love others in kind.

Amen.