

By The Numbers
Luke 13:31-35
March 17, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The Word of the Lord from Luke 13[:32]: "Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish My course." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ,

One, two, three. Today, tomorrow and the third day.

In our Gospel lesson, God's plan for your salvation is going just the way it is supposed to. Nothing is going to stop the Lord from finishing. Given the foes arrayed against Him in our Gospel lesson, that's quite a statement. But the plan is moving along, one, two, three.

At the moment, Jesus is somewhere around Galilee—that's Herod's territory, and Herod is an unpredictable ruler. He's had John the Baptist imprisoned for denouncing his adultery; and though he feared John and didn't want to kill him, he's had him beheaded at the request of his niece. He's also expressed an interest in seeing Jesus before; but given his volatile record, no one knows what he thinks about Jesus at the present moment. It's a bit of a mystery, at least to us. Not so much for the Pharisees.

It's the Pharisees, after all, who warn Jesus to run away: "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!" they tell Jesus. It's hard to know why the Pharisees are warning Him. There's the possibility that these are some who are sympathetic to the Savior, who earnestly want Him out of harm's way. It may be equally true that they're enemies who are tired of being stymied at every turn, so they just want Him to go somewhere else. Or perhaps they're trying to flush Him down into Judea, towards Jerusalem, where they might well have more power and influence. In any event, whether their motives are noble or sinister, they tell Jesus to get out of Galilee, and fast.

Jesus doesn't accommodate them with His reply. He says, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish My course.'"

"Go and tell that fox," says Jesus. Herod is a cunning sort of ruler, and our modern expression "crazy like a fox" may not be that far off; whether or not he's out to kill Jesus, he's hardly an example of a just and noble ruler. Jesus isn't going out of His way to insult the man: He's simply saying what is true. It's the next part that's worth some time and thought. Jesus says: "Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish My course."

There's an unspoken sentence after this that I think we can safely plug in: "And no one is going to stop Me."

That's the comfort of this text: Jesus is in complete control of His destiny. He's not living by the seat of His pants, outwitting His opponents for one more day. He's going to keep going about His ministry until it's time for Him to go to the cross. No matter how much Herod wants Him dead, the Son of God is going to stay alive for as long as He wills. No matter how much the Pharisees want Him out of the

way, He's going to keep going about His Father's plan for salvation. If the plan is to preach and heal today, He's going to preach and heal today. If the plan is to do the same tomorrow, nothing can stop Him from doing the same thing tomorrow. If it's His will to finish His course on the third day, He's going to finish His course on the third day. He can't be stopped from saving you.

In the second half of our Gospel lesson, Jesus speaks of finishing His course. He will go, His way, "today and the day following," and then He will finish His course by going to Jerusalem—going to die. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken." It shouldn't be that way: no city should be better at worshiping God than Jerusalem. That's where God put His temple in the Old Testament. That's where He placed King David to rule. And when the people rebelled against Him, He sent prophet after prophet to warn them of their sin and call them to repentance—call them back to Him and His grace. In response, they killed prophet after prophet and rebelled against Him more.

So Jesus says He is going to Jerusalem: and even if Herod is out to kill Him in Galilee, this is leaving the frying pan and going straight for the fire. He says, "I must go on My way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem." Although His death is very near, Jesus is not going to die in three days' time. He's just saying that He's going to Jerusalem on His own terms. When He arrives, the crowds will shout out, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!": but Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die. And He is still in control. It is not that He is being drawn there against His will, as if circumstances leave Him no other choice. He goes because He wants to, and He will die because it is His plan to die. He will cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day He will finish His course.

The "third day." It's an interesting phrase for Jesus to use. Outside of this passage "the third day" is used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus' resurrection. So let this be a reminder, too, of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. On the first day, He dies willingly for your sin, and nobody can keep Him from redeeming you. On the next day, He descends into hell to proclaim His victory, and not even the devil can keep Him from doing so—or from leaving again. And on the third day? He rises again from the dead. Not even death can stop Him from His work of redemption—His work of redemption for you.

One, two, three. Today, tomorrow and the third day for you also.

From here, you have today. You are here, breathing and baptized, because the Lord has willed it to be so; and because the Lord has willed it to be so, nothing can keep you from having today.

God willing, you also have tomorrow. Unless the Lord wills otherwise, you've got another day—and perhaps many more—left in this world, because the Lord has willed it to be so. And because the Lord has willed it to be so, nothing can keep you from having tomorrow.

You have a third day, too. You have a day of resurrection. You have heaven and its eternal day. This is also, most certainly, because the Lord wills it to be so. That is why Jesus is casting out demons and performing cures and preaching the Good News during His days of ministry on the way to Jerusalem; and that is certainly why He goes to Jerusalem to die on the cross. Now, He has finished His course:

He declared "It is finished" from the cross. Nothing kept Him from dying in your place, for your sin. Likewise, nothing can separate you from Him. He's made you His own in baptism, and He continues to keep you as His own by His Word and His Supper. As Romans 8:31-34 declares, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" Answer: no one. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Answer: He won't stop now. "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." Answer: no one can bring a charge against you before God. If He says you're justified, then you're justified. "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." Answer: no one can condemn you, because Christ has died and Christ has risen for you.

That's the Good News of the text: nothing can separate you from the love of God, which He gives you freely in Christ Jesus, your Lord.

It is a free gift. God does not force it upon you, but gives it freely for Christ's sake. But you will be tempted to throw away the gift, so here is the Law: do not forsake God's gift of grace for those who would pressure you to do so. Since Jesus is opposed by people in today's Gospel lesson, let's talk about how people may well oppose your faith.

Like Herod of old, rulers and authorities have a habit of doing so. We still enjoy religious freedom in our land, and we too often take it for granted; but throughout history, the state defending the Church is a rarity. Very often in the past, Christians have had to endure severe persecution by rulers in order to remain faithful to God, to cling to the hope of eternal life in Christ. We're certainly not at the point of bloodshed. But it seems that the day has already come when "political correctness" has run so amok that that law will say you cannot voice the truth of God's Word; loud elements of our society have already stated this as a wish. The day may come when tax codes make it difficult for churches to own property, or make it financially tough for Christians to marry rather than just live together. The law of man is intimidating stuff; and when it does not conflict with God's Word, we are the first to follow it. But should rulers and laws demand or suggest that we should disobey God's Word, we say, "We must obey God rather than man."

It may not be in the form of civil rulers. It may, for instance, be the boss who wants you to compromise your ethics, and commit some sin in service to the company.

Like the Pharisees, there are plenty of false teachers out there who will tell you that you need to dump the Gospel. This message of "salvation in Christ alone" is far too exclusive for the taste of many, while God's law is unpopular -- too strict for sinful flesh. There will be plenty of religious people, calling themselves "Christian" or something else, who want you to trade in the one true faith for something else instead.

Please note: such temptations may come in the form of open threats, shrill critics and obvious bullies. Such forceful people are an intimidating bunch, and it is easy to be cowed into submission. But these temptations might also come in seductive forms, where you really, really want to forsake God's Word and follow the crowd.

When you are still a youth, this assault is just getting started. The older and more independent you become, the less shielded you are from such attacks. You'll be tempted to be disrespectful towards your parents and authorities, because it's cool to be a rebel and society loves cool rebels; but the sin behind that is to rebel against God who gave you your parents, so that in your rebellion you put your salvation at risk. You might well have the teacher who makes it a point to criticize Christianity in favor of science or humanistic thought, making fun of you and all those who would support the biblical account of creation or the morality that God commands; and it's a tough deal to stand when the authorities are picking on you. The greatest temptation, though, may come in the form of the one who steals your heart away, whom you grow to love very much, but who does not want to support you in your faith. Some of these temptations are easy to spot because they're frightening; and some of them will be so tempting that you'll want to deny that they're sinful at all. But all of it is designed to get you to depart from God's plan, to forsake His grace and run away with the world.

Don't be deceived. These temptations will hurt, either in the form of persecution or heartbreak. The prophets of God died in Jerusalem. The devil wants you hurt enough that you'll forsake salvation.

But don't let that happen, for the Lord desires far better for you and has died to make it so. He has given you your today and—God willing—your tomorrow. And in the days He gives you on earth, He will use all things for your good. He will even use all the tyrants and bullies of life for your good—and nothing can stop Him from doing so. He will even use your suffering and heartbreak for your good, too. Throughout today and tomorrow, He will not forsake you. He is as near as His Word. And because of His faithfulness today and tomorrow, you also have the hope of your third day—the day of resurrection. Eternal life in heaven, where the pain and heartbreak of this world are former things that have passed away.

That eternal life is yours, for Christ has made it so. Nothing can stop Him from giving it to you—not Herod, not the Pharisees, not the principalities and powers of darkness, not sin nor death nor hell. For nothing can stop Christ from saying to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen