

We have two great readings for today, and they connect to us in a very interesting way – we'll talk about that in a few minutes.

Now I know this is the more somber time of Lent – but, because we are celebrating a baptism and our church family is growing, I feel we need to celebrate this Sunday like the “little Easter” it's supposed to be and give you a very short, very positive sermon this morning. (If we want to get technical, Lent really only counts the non-Sundays – each Sunday is to stand alone like its own Easter).

So let's look at the Scriptures.

In the first reading from Luke, Jesus has been warned (by the Pharisees, of all people!) that Herod is gunning for him...and he says, “You tell that Herod I don't have time for him – I'm too busy doing God's Work. I'm almost done here – and besides, if he's smart, he won't make a fool of me here in Jerusalem, as was done with all those other prophets.”

I love it when Jesus gets just a little testy with the bad guys. I wonder how this message was received by Herod and the good people of Jerusalem?

Before Jesus dismisses the Pharisees, he recites a beautiful speech describing how much he loves Jerusalem, and how badly he wanted to take care of it, like a mother hen would spread her wings to protect her brood. But Jerusalem didn't take him seriously. The people of Jerusalem ignored him and now he's getting ready to leave. Jesus tells them he won't return until they recognize just who he really is and what he means to the world.

Sadly, we know that Herod, in fact, didn't listen to this advice – not long after this Jesus stands before him in a mock trial, with crowds of people yelling for his crucifixion. Though we know better, Jesus looked like a fool...Herod, and the people of Jerusalem, didn't get it.

In our second scripture lesson, in a letter from Paul to the Philippians in Greece, there are warnings again, but this time, it's to remind the people that there are good paths and not-so-good paths to take along the journey. Paul describes folks who take the easy paths that don't pass by the Cross as they gorge themselves with life's pleasures, and forget what's important with God.

Paul wants the good people of Philippi to 'stay the course' and remember that while the path can get rocky sometimes, if they hang on, Jesus will return to do some serious adjustments to how things are in this world. And since they are the body of Christ, Jesus will also help them get "buffed out" and strong and whole – surrounded and protected by God's glory and love.

Paul says all this with the love of a doting uncle.

The Philippians are special to him, and he wants them to succeed, because not only do they support his ministry financially with money from their gold mines, but also because Paul experienced many interesting things while he was visiting them on his first trip to Philippi.

He visited the city around AD 50 – he'd taken Silas, Timothy and maybe Luke with him. He preached for the first time on European soil in Philippi, and in a river nearby, he baptized a woman named Lydia, who was a merchant in the purple dye trade. He must have been feeling the power of God while he was there, because he also spent some time exorcising demonic spirits from a slave girl – but this got him into some trouble with church leaders, and so he and Silas (who was assisting him) were arrested, beaten in public and thrown in the local jail.

An earthquake forced the prison doors open, but no one left – in fact, when the jailer (who'd been sleeping through this whole thing) woke up worried that he would be in big trouble because all the prisoners had escaped. When Paul informed him that the inmates were still around, the relieved jailer became an instant convert – one of the first Christians in Europe.

This is already a great story – but there's more.

The money which provided for Paul's ministry may have come from a bevy of rich women in Philippi – apparently, there wasn't much of a Jewish community around and few Jewish men, there wasn't a synagogue, and so the little group of believers met by the river, which made it easy for him to baptize converts.

Paul had very positive days while visiting this little town in Greece, and he liked Philippi so much, he made the journey back to visit twice more in 56 and 57; the Letter to the Philippians we heard from today dates around 61 or 62 after his last visit.

Well I hinted to you that there were some connections to be made with these readings for today - by now, you may have noticed one. We, too, are baptizing a woman named Lydia – and I happen to know that she loves the color purple. How about that?

We could also say that, like Paul and the Philippians, this church is supporting the work of the minister in Prescott – and there is mutual admiration all around. It's clear you trust me, and you recognize that I'm working from my core beliefs in God's Way.

God has brought me to you to see to your needs and to remind you to stay on the course – and even though we're moving forward, and we can feel God guiding us, we need to keep our eyes on the prize – we need to stay focused on God's love and our purpose in God's Way. God needs to be at the center of all we do – the Guiding Light shines brightly – we just have to follow it on that very special path.

Now sometimes it can feel a little bumpy, but if we trust the path is worn in the right places to lead us to where God wants us to be, we'll be just fine. I have the feeling it also wouldn't hurt to blaze a little trail now and then, either, because being adventurous for God can get us a new, better path. I know there are a few trailblazers out there...

If there's a connection to the first reading, from my own perspective, I'd identify with the line in which Jesus says to the Pharisees –  
“...don't bother me - I'm too busy doing God's work!”

I don't think I'd be quite so grumpy about it, though.

I like being busy and I truly love doing God's work with and for you – but just now, I'm more than busy, finishing seminary coursework for this quarter, and preparing for our regular church life and also for the special events during each week in Lent. With so much going on in my little world, there's a danger I could lose you because it might seem like I'm too busy and preoccupied - and you might feel neglected. I need to watch out for that.

And what's wonderful (and scary at the same time) is that I know I'm not alone in this "busy" mode doing God's work. So many of you have taken on different roles both in and out of this church...since we're smaller than other congregations, there's a tendency for us to take on more than our share, and we can become worn out.

If we aren't careful, we could be like the City of Jerusalem...the message and the messenger are here, waiting to tell us the Good News, but we might miss the whole thing.

There's a danger in getting caught up in "doing" – and forgetting the really important part of our faith life together that's quieter and slower. We might miss the chance to recognize what's purposeful and meaningful – to cling to the truth of the importance of who God is and how God's gift of Jesus impacts our very lives.

This is why we need Lent and its focus on centeredness and repentance – on the quieter part of believing. Lent forces us to stop our busy-ness, to look at where we're going, and to think about what we're doing – so that we don't lose sight of our mutual goals for God's Way and that "prize" of God's eternal love that awaits us.

Jesus instinctively knew this; often, he removed himself from the crowds and the craziness to go off alone to pray. I bet his prayers were all about pulling his thoughts and life back to a focus on God's intent – I bet that just like us, Jesus needed to remember every day that God was in control.

Paul seemed to understand this as well...his letter to the Philippians made it very clear. There's a good path and a "not-so-good" path – the secret is to stay on that good path and ignore the temptations that would drag us off it.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, we're on that good path, we're listening to God and, little at a time, we're bringing more friends with us on the Walk. Let's use our "little Easter" today to celebrate God's love for this church and the people within it – and to joyfully take time to give thanks to God that we know something amazing waits for us at the other end.

I'll see you along the way...Amen.