

FAITH IN THE THICK OF THINGS¹
Luke 13: 31-35
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Every year when we get a spate of snowy weather that cancels a few night meetings, I see people with a look of relief on their faces. It's not that they don't want to get the work done; its more of a sense that an evening at home when normally we would be at a committee meeting gives that feeling you had as a child when you thought you were getting away with something. It's like an unexpected break in a hectic schedule.

I

We tend to start in September with great energy and resolutions to get a huge amount accomplished. And we do! There is work to be done, and we are the ones to do it. Then by October and November we are in the thick of things. We have overflowing inboxes, 24/7 connectivity, and multi-tasking. At the end of the day there is always more to do, people to see, visits to make, phone calls to check off, papers to write, and shopping to do.

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We are in the thick of things, and we are determined. Then comes December, and the holidays pose a challenge that we are determined to meet. And we do pretty well...until we start getting those Christmas letters from friends. It's always good to see what they have done throughout the year, but some of those letters can make us feel like we haven't done very much. Take this Christmas letter that was published as an example of how not to write one:

Dear Friend,

It has been another year of magic and wonder. Lori, almost 6, is quite a talker. She continues to amaze the professors at the University with her intuition in foreign languages. It was fun for her to serve as Official Translator for Palestinian/Israeli Peace Talks. She intends to spend this holiday transcribing *War and Peace* into Arabic and Cantonese.

Betsy had a very busy year. In between her work as President of the American Cancer Society and Senior Partner of Goldman Sachs, she introduced a line of children's novels and hand made active-wear. We are particularly proud of her role as a starting forward representing the United States in the World Cup.

Dave was immersed with his graduate school studies, and managed to co-author a paper on Multidimensional Customer Attribute Analysis and accepted a Nobel Prize for his discoveries in Quantum Physics. We are proud of his work serving on the Board of Directors for IBM, Coca-Cola, and Walt Disney.

We were able to squeeze in a little traveling this year. We started in Aspen, went to the Congo, Denmark, Ethiopia, the Falklands, Greenland, Holland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Venezuela, and Zaire. Our trip sailing our new boat around the world was a great experience for the kids.

Other than that, it was a quiet year. So from our household to yours, all the blessings of the season, and may your new year be prosperous.

So we get a letter like that and wonder what we have been doing with our lives! Computers were supposed to help us get our work done more quickly, presumably for time to do other things. But instead, we have to make sure we turn off our hand held devices when we are in church because we will want to answer email during the prayers. Without intending for it to happen, or knowing how and when it got started, by February many people get worn down from the rush. If you feel busier than you have ever been, even if you are retired, and you wonder how this happened and how you can keep up the pace, then you are not alone. A leading medical expert on Attention Deficit Disorder has written a book entitled, *CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap! Strategies for Coping in a World Gone ADD.*²

Is there room for faith in such a world? That is what our scripture for today is all about.

II

How do we know that? Just before today's reading, we get a glimpse into the schedule Jesus was keeping. The text says, *Jesus went*

² Edward M. Hallowell, *CrazyBusy* (Ballentine Books, 2007).

*through one town and village after another.*³ Does that sound familiar?

We go through one thing after another: meeting after meeting, appointment after appointment, crisis after crisis, demand after demand. It is the picture of living in the thick of things.

It is a far cry from back in the earlier days of the gospel when he was back up in Galilee where people were friendlier, life was slower, and he could climb a mountain just to enjoy the view. Life was simpler then, like it is for us in the summer months. But now he was in the thick of things, dealing with crowds yearning for his time and attention, dealing with religious leaders challenging his positions, dealing with the sick who needed healing, dealing with the disciples who were trying to understand him, and dealing with the authorities who were threatening him.

And that is where we enter today's text: right in the thick of things. Some Pharisees sidle up to him and whisper, *Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.* The fascinating thing about this text is that we don't know if those Pharisees were really friendly toward Jesus and were trying to warn him of imminent danger from Herod, or if they

³ Luke 13:22.

were really enemies of Jesus just trying to get him to run for the hills and be out of their way.

What we do know, however, is that Jesus told them to tell Herod to stuff it. Well, not exactly.... He called Herod a fox. What is hidden in the English translation is that he called Herod a female fox, which in that culture was to ratchet up the contempt for Herod. We have a parallel today, but you don't want me to repeat it in the pulpit. Some people may be offended that Jesus would use such language, but I have a theory about that. I imagine Jesus standing at the foot of a cross with a fellow countryman nailed to that cross gasping for breath and dying a slow death at the hands of Roman guards.

Every historical record argues that crucifixions were a common form of punishment for non-Roman citizens of Jerusalem, and the soldiers commonly lined the road leading to Jerusalem with crosses to show any traveler what could happen if they disobeyed Roman law. I imagine Jesus and his disciples coming upon this horrifying and grotesque form of punishment, hearing the cries of the poor suffering man nailed to the wood above them, and looking at the gleaming walls of the city just before them.

It is in that context that I imagine him saying what is written in today's text: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills...* This is living faith in the thick of things. This is maintaining your faith when you aren't sure you can go on another step! This is keeping the faith when everything seems to be going wrong!

III

As long as we are in the thick of things, I think it is worth noting the barnyard metaphor Jesus uses in this text. *How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* When danger threatens, the hen gathers her brood under her wings for protection. The little chicks are running all around the barnyard, but the mother hen runs after them and gathers them under her wings for protection.

This is not the first time in the Bible that a feminine image is used for the divine. Isaiah pictures a people who are so caught up in the thick of things that they complain that God has forsaken them, and Isaiah says, *Can a woman forget her nursing child?*⁴ If Isaiah can compare God to a nursing mother; if Jesus can compare divine love to the mother hen protecting her children under her wings; then why do we gulp when

⁴ Isaiah 49: 14-15.

people recognize that God's love is broader and deeper and more protective than a male image alone can supply? To think of God in feminine terms is not to deny God the Father; rather it is to expand our conception of a God who is greater than gender, greater than any one image we can conjure up to describe the length to which God will go in God's love for us.

IV

There are still the Herod's of this world—deceptive, cunning, oppressive, and sometimes savage. There are still journeys we take to the Jerusalem's of this world, journeys that lead us into the thick of things. But it also remains true that God is faithful in gathering and protecting us all through the thick of things, even if we are walking *through the valley of the shadow of death!*⁵

The good news of Lent is that Christ has been there in the thick of things, and is very much in touch with the depth of our struggles. From the thick of things, he calls us to follow him, not just in the summer days when the sun is shining and the birds are singing, but in those cold wintry days when the snow is falling and you are in the thick of things.

⁵ Psalm 23.

“Jesus calls us o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea,” says the first verse of the hymn. And for many of us, life is like that, but that *still, small voice* is persistent: “Christian, follow me,” even in the thick of things.