

Our story begins with Jesus urgently journeying to Jerusalem where Herod, Pilate, and the Jewish Authorities await, as well as betrayal, denial, torture, and the cross. With all this awaiting, he continues to trust in God and put his hope in the promise of God and the resurrection. As he heads to Jerusalem, some Pharisees approach him.

Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.

³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Saint Patrick's Day, or the Feast of Saint Patrick, is tomorrow. It is a religious and cultural holiday held on March 17th, the traditional death date of Saint Patrick (c. 385 – c. 461), the foremost patron saint of Ireland. St. Patrick's Day is celebrated in more countries than any other national festival. Modern celebrations have been greatly influenced by those of the Irish diaspora, particularly those that developed in North America. However, there has been criticism of Saint Patrick's Day celebrations for having become too commercialized and for fostering negative stereotypes of the Irish people.

Historically, the Lenten restrictions on fasting and drinking alcohol were lifted for the day, which has encouraged the holiday's tradition of revelry.

Saint Patrick's Day - Wikipedia

It has an image of being a modern excuse for parties, partying, and parades.

What do the Irish make of all of this?

I pose that question to remind us of what we already know: You can't ask what a group of people think about anything and get an accurate answer. There are so many differences of understanding; one group should rarely be treated with a universal description of beliefs.

That's just how it was for the Pharisees in today's story. Most people have a stereotype of the Pharisees; they, along with the Sadducees and Scribes, are generally lumped together as Jesus' prime opponents—the bad guys! But that is not true of all Pharisees. In today's story, they come to warn him that Herod is seeking to kill him. They know Herod has already killed John the Baptist. So, they urged him to flee.

This is one of the occasions when some of the Pharisees come to him as allies. In addition, he dines with the Pharisees and debates the will of God with them, and many were among the first followers of the risen Christ. This reminds us that no group of people should regularly be treated as monolithic. It is nonsensical to lump all people together based on what Jews, Presbyterians, or U.S. citizens think. There are many answers.

Back to the story.

But Jesus refuses to flee and says, "Go tell that old fox, I have work to finish." Just so we get it, the fox was not considered a cute, small animal but a cunning, destructive pest. Jesus refuses to give into fear. And scripture reminds us to fear not some 365 times; it is said, one for each day.

So, Jesus continues his way to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish religion, where he must go to complete his mission.

On his way, he taught about the Kingdom of God and healed many folks. In his person, words, and deeds, glimpses of God's Kingdom of Love are visible.

He knows what awaits him there, and despite the cross as a do-not-enter sign, he continues to Jerusalem without giving into fear on his journey.

As he traveled, he continued to urge people to repent and receive the forgiveness of their sins. There was an old book whose title said it all. Whatever, Became of Sin. Many people don't like to talk about sin as it tends to bring people down, especially when mishandled. Jesus called us beyond dwelling on sin and negativity, though he didn't ignore it. He spoke of sin but also told people about the forgiveness of God, who wants more than anything to have a positive relationship with people and bring us home. Jesus called the path to this positive relationship, repentance, changing our hearts, minds, and lives.

And that is still God's will today: God wants us to repent and experience the forgiveness and new life that comes with it. But this desire of God needs our reception for it to make a difference in our lives.

One of the best images of this forgiveness I have found is the story of a family that took down their Christmas tree a good while after Christmas. Stuck in the branches was a present that they had overlooked.

Now the present was and had been theirs, but they didn't know it or come to appreciate it until they opened it. So it is with forgiveness; until you open the gift from God, it does no good. And it is precisely this gift from God that helps us change our minds, hearts, and lives.

My favorite prayer for the forgiveness of sin helps me recognize the gift that awaits me:

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change; open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

God wants to love us into changing our hearts, minds, and lives, not scare us with the fear of any change. Because God knows how hard it is for us to change, God gives us the love and support we need to accept this forgiveness and change.

It is hard to change even when we want to and know better. But our faith opens pathways for that growth.

The disciples missed this part of his teaching. They were so locked into their image of Jesus as a conquering hero and powerful religious leader that they couldn't grasp that his path to God led to the cross. But it didn't stop there. The resurrection followed it. The ultimate declaration of God's love for us is that nothing we can do will stop God from loving us and giving us the gift of forgiveness.

We may feel that some of our thoughts, words, and actions have let God down, but God wants us to know that the gift of love and forgiveness is stronger than our failings.

God loves us and wants us to experience that love. God wants us to rely on that love and know that God, not Pilate, Herod, Caesar, or any principality, power, or politician, holds our eternal destiny.

It's hard for us to accept that sometimes. Our failure to accept God's gift of love and forgiveness doesn't destroy God's gift of love and forgiveness but destroys our enjoyment of the gift. We just find it hard to change.

When I was in seminary, one of the biggest battles was over inclusive language for God. It was not over Jesus calling God Father, which was a given; that's what he did, but to show that there were other images of God, even many feminine images. Recognizing this was very hard for many. It felt like a challenge to their faith and the way they had always called God "he."

It was even hard for people to change when the images in scripture were pointed out. For example, Jesus used other imagery for God. In today's passage, he compares God to a mother hen who longs to keep her chicks tucked safely under her wings and love and protect them.

God is like a mother hen who loves you and wants to keep you safe, but you must accept that love to experience it. We must open this present. Jesus

expressed his trust in God's love and the deep love he had for Jerusalem even though he knew how he would be treated there by many of those in power. God wanted them to change, but God still loved them even if they didn't. God loved the entire city of Jerusalem. And God never stops trying to help us experience this wonderful gift of love.

Jesus laments that so many don't accept God's gift of love. God knows it's hard for people to change, sometimes even those who received God's message through Jesus. People get set in their ways, and change feels unnecessary, if not impossible.

It's hard for us to change; we can be like Jonah. You know the parable about Jonah? God came to him and said, "Go tell Nineveh to repent." Nineveh was the traditional enemy of the Jewish people. So, what did Jonah do? He ran away and took a ship in the opposite direction. This caused the boat to sink, and the only thing that saved the ship was throwing Jonah overboard.

But our God is a God of second chances and comes to Jonah in the form of a giant fish that swallowed him; I always picture one of those Jurassic Park giant sea creatures. The fish carries him to Nineveh and vomits him up on shore.

With the most half-hearted attempt, he says, almost in a whisper, that "You all might want to consider maybe thinking about repenting," and to his dismay, they do. So, he goes off to sulk and sees the sun beat down on a newly sprouted plant that shelters him from the sun, but then a worm comes and eats the plant, and Jonah is filled with sorrow over its death. But he is also angry at God for forgiving Nineveh. Then, God confronts Jonah.

You're concerned about shrubbery, but not Nineveh with all its people and animals. Jonah said, "I knew you would forgive them. That's who you are, and it's unfair; they don't deserve it."

But in God's eyes, they do. God wants Jonah and us to know that God's love for us and willingness to love us knows no bounds. God loves the Irish. This is when everyone can be treated as one: the Pharisees, the Ninevites, Jonah, and you and me.

God's love for us is the unifying factor, and the only thing that can encompass all folks that lumps us all together is the declaration that we are all God's beloved children and siblings. God desires us to receive that love for our own sake and the sake of those around us.

Our God is a God of second chances and continually calls to us come home!