

Lent IIC
Luke 13: 31-35
February 28, 2010

Random. That was my kids' favorite phrase about five years ago. Everything was random. A joke, a song, some smart remark someone made, and the response was always the same. "Wow," they would say. "That was random."

Random. You might as well use it to describe everything. Another earthquake, even bigger than the one in Haiti, yesterday in Chile, with more death, more destruction, and tsunamis all across the Pacific Rim adding to the mix. ***Random.*** A young man dead of cancer at 20 years of age, glioma scattered like stars across his brain. ***Random.*** Waking up each morning to find your world untouched, yourself alive and well, and everyone you love still safe, still here, still OK. That's random too.

We live in an age of chronic anxiety, of never-ending, permeating fear that surrounds us like a haze -- a haze we don't even see anymore because we are so accustomed to it. Although we also live in an age of unprecedented security ... no longer victims to waves of bubonic plague, the surprise of crippling polio, an epidemic of smallpox ... although we have seat belts and car seats and smoke alarms and security cameras, they just make us more conscious of the lurking dangers. The nonstop barrage of warnings from news networks, social networks, computer networks, keeps us at a state of readiness.

We are always waiting for the next shoe to drop. Why? Because there's always another shoe out there somewhere. ***Random.***

The Pharisees knew about random. Random, like one day the Roman general Pompey enters Jerusalem and all your native rulers are ejected, or turned into puppets for the occupiers. Random, like Herod Antipas, one of those puppet kings, who one day visits his prisoner John the Baptist for a theological chat, and the next day has the Baptist's head delivered on a platter.

So, in order to deal with their chronic anxiety and fear, the Pharisees call for strict adherence to the Jewish law -- both the written scriptures and the oral traditions. To deal with their chronic anxiety and fear, the Pharisees try to challenge, stifle, and smother the activities of that unpredictable teacher and healer, Jesus of Nazareth.

What will Jesus do next? What might Herod do in reply? What would the Romans do then? What would happen to the Jewish people? The Pharisees draw Jesus into a triangle of anxiety. “Get away from here,” they tell him. “For Herod wants to kill you.”

What might happen then? Anything. Something. Something unpredictable. Something potentially dangerous. Get away from here, Jesus, they beg. Get away before it all gets ... *random*.

There is such a strong yearning in the human spirit, such a panicked desire to have everything be OK. We grasp at the closest solution, the quickest fix. Whether it's Pharisees trying to hustle Jesus out of town before Herod goes open loop again, or whether it's the TSA adding yet another onerous action to the many onerous actions at the airport security line, we will do the handiest action possible to *feel* secure, even if that handy action changes nothing.

In a world where *random* happens, there is so little we can do to ward it off. Putting your shoes in the bin and keeping all your liquids under three ounces doesn't make our airplanes more secure. Journalists and security experts have proven that. *Atlantic* author Jeffery Goldberg snuck more than 250 prohibited items through TSA screening points over the course of a year, just to have a story for the magazine. Bruce Schneier, one of the world's top cryptographers and security analysts, has figured a way to foil the Do Not Fly List with just a computer, a printer and a simple graphics program.

Yet we dutifully line up to empty our pockets, to remove our shoes and belts, to be patted and wanded and x-rayed, and soon, to be put through full body scanners, where nothing is left to the imagination. We do this because it gives us the illusion of control. It makes us feel safe in a dangerous world. It buries the possibility of random under a liturgy of safety. Bruce Schneier calls it “security theater.”

In this morning's gospel, the Pharisees are practicing security theater too. Sending Jesus away won't make Herod any less random, or any less dangerous. Sending Jesus away won't make everyone sigh with relief and go back to the details of Jewish religious observance. Sending Jesus away won't make the Romans go away. But the Pharisees decide they will FEEL better if he leaves the area. They believe they are taking a positive sort of action. They imagine that they can make it safely through this Roman occupation.

In a world where all of us, Pharisees and plane travelers, governments and citizens, men and women all try so hard, and collude so effectively together, to drape a veil of security and safety and predictability over a world that is insecure, unsafe and *random*, Jesus is fearless.

Fearless. Focused. And crystal clear about who he is and what he is about. To Jesus, Herod is no lion of Judah. He's just a fox, prowling around the farm yard. "Go and tell that fox for me," Jesus says, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work."

Jesus is not afraid of Herod. No one can stop him from doing what he was sent to do -- his heaven-sent work of bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the captives and proclamation of God's free and unconditional love for poor, beleaguered humanity. And his mission is directing him to the place where he has always intended to go ... to Jerusalem, the seat of his religion and the center of his world.

Jesus is heading, with single-minded purpose, toward the most random city in civilization. Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it. Jerusalem, the city that will greet him with palms and shouts and cries of "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Jerusalem, the city that will turn traitor with shouts of "Crucify! Crucify him!" Jerusalem, the city that will nail him to a cross and hang him out to dry.

And Jesus knows this. Knows it and accepts it. He understands that the people around him are so fearful, so frightened, so distracted by things they believe they can control, that they cannot see him for who he is, the mother hen with breast exposed, wings spread wide to shield and to embrace. They are like his beloved chicks, but they have been addled by the sheer terror of living as they must ... ruled by Romans, crushed by taxes, and victims of all the disease, injury and accident the first-century world has to offer. And so they run – not toward him – but away from him.

Still Jesus does not falter. Jesus does not fear. Jesus keeps right on being the person he was made to be, doing the work he was sent to do. Anxiety cannot stop him. Fear cannot stop him. His random, pointless, nonsensical death cannot stop him. Jesus goes right on, being the living embodiment of God's unending love and acceptance of the whole bruised and broken, torn and terrified, human race.

This is no quick fix. Jesus died in Jerusalem and rose again in order to reconcile us to God and to each other. The work is accomplished, but it has taken thousands of years to begin to become a reality. We are still fearful people. We do still cling to the illusion that we can create our own safe, secure little lives. We still hide from one another, hurt one another, lash out at one another in order to make ourselves feel better ... to make ourselves feel safer. We are still hesitant to stand up, to step out in faith, to live with courage and conviction, to trust that God travels with us faithfully, even in a world that is so incurably *random*.

You know, there is no quick fix – really. This is a dangerous world, and we all are living lives bound for an inevitable grave. And Jesus offers us no illusion of security in the way he inaugurates his kingdom, lives his life and accepts his death. This is not Security Theater. This is not theater at all. This is a life – a divine life that shines out from within one mortal, human life.

And this is exactly what Jesus came for. To show us – by the way he lived his life, how to live our own. How to live, and to love, our way through our random, unpredictable lives.

How? Boldly. Fearlessly. With gladness and singleness of heart.