

Luke 13:31-35 N.T. Page 72 (NRSV)

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! ³⁵See, 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.’”

Luke 13:31-35 N.T. Page 72
“The Shelter of His Wings”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Eternal Father, draw us into your holy presence today and hold us close. Calm our minds, and quiet our souls, as we listen for your Live sustaining Word today. In Jesus’ name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **One Sunday** morning about 15 years ago, as worship was letting out at the church I served in Big Run; I was standing at the church door shaking people’s hands, when suddenly there was the squeal of breaks and the unmistakable **thud of two cars crashing.** I looked toward the sound and instantly recognized one of the cars as being **Pauline’s**, one of the older members of the congregation. Pauline’s foot had slipped missing the break allowing her car to drift onto the highway into oncoming traffic. As I ran to the scene, I saw Pauline and the driver of the other car both getting out, shaken but otherwise unhurt. Then the passenger door of the other car opened, and I saw **a man crawl out and sit on the ground.** I went over to the man and asked him where it hurt. He said his neck and back. Fearing the worst, **I knelt down beside** him planting one knee on the ground and using the other to support his back trying to keep him still. **Others at the scene called 911** and assured us that an ambulance was on the way.

Seconds seem like an eternity when you’re waiting for an ambulance. I did what I could to keep the man calm and make him more comfortable. It was cold and the ground was hard. It was awkward holding the man up as I knelt on the pavement. The muscles in my legs began to ache and the knee I had planted on the ground began to throb. **Finally, the ambulance arrived,** and the paramedics mercifully took over. Later I learned that the man was fine, only a few bruises and sprains. But that experience taught me one of the simple truths of ministry.

Providing comfort to someone else can sometimes be downright uncomfortable.

PAUSE

Move I.

Jesus calls us to comfort hurting people. Jesus never said it would be easy. Jesus never said it wouldn't ever hurt. Jesus simply asks us to take up our crosses and follow him. Jesus is on a mission, and to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to accompany Jesus on that mission. **Our Bible lesson today** from the Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was busy driving out demons and healing people in the Galilean countryside. Jesus was constantly ministering to the people around him who were hurting both physically and spiritually. Jesus was teaching his disciples by his example as well as by his words. **Today when we think** of Jesus' teaching, we tend to think of his sermons and his parables. We think of teaching as being Jesus' words. But Jesus wasn't just a man of words; **he was also a man of action.** And Jesus' actions played just as important of role in teaching his disciples as his words did. Jesus' earthly ministry was a literal "*show and tell*" for the ideals of the Christian life. Jesus didn't just sit around in the synagogues debating the meaning of faith; Jesus went out into the streets and put that faith into practice. Jesus drove out demons and healed people. **Yes, Jesus' earthly ministry** involved both words and actions.

One of Natural Church Development's eight characteristics of a healthy church is that a healthy church has "**Need Oriented Evangelism.**" A healthy church tailors its outreach to meet people where they are in ways that demonstrates Jesus' love for them. Another way to say this is to look for hurting people around you and find ways to comfort them. **Need-oriented-evangelism** involves meeting people where they are in a non-judgmental way. **Our church's purpose** is to share our passion for Jesus Christ with Erie's next generations. **But here in the city, 2/3 of those kids** are being raised in single-parent homes. For us, **need-oriented-evangelism** needs to be reaching out to single-parents and their kids.

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When I first started in ministry and was serving in Punxsutawney, I received a phone call from a welfare mom with six children who'd been without water for a week because she owed the water company more than \$800. Now **Children and Youth Services** were threatening take her children away. I'm suspicious of stories like this, I've heard them all before, but this time I decided to go and pay this mother a surprise visit. When I arrived, the house smelled because they've all been using the toilet without water. **Mom explained** that her children have four different fathers, two of which were in prison and the other two who rarely made any child support payments. Her four older children were at school and the two younger children clearly needed a bath. As I spoke with the mother, her little boy, who is hyperactive, was jumping and hanging all over me. As he hung around my neck, **this little boy proceeded** to bit me on the collarbone as hard as he could. It really hurt. Fortunately, he didn't break the skin, but the bruise lasted for weeks. When I told his mother what he'd done, **she simply pointed** to several similar burses on her body.

Nothing in seminary prepares you situations like that. I not a social worker; I'm a pastor. What could I do? So, I asked if we could pray together, and much to my surprise, **the kids quieted down**, and we all formed a circle and joined hands. I prayed entrusting the care of this mother and her children to God. As I left, **I handed the mother** the little cash I had in my pocket. It wasn't nearly enough to pay her water bill, but it was what I had. For all I know she used the money to buy cigarettes. Perhaps those kids would have been better off in foster care. I don't know. **I do know** ministry is words and actions. I was a minister of the gospel as surely that afternoon as I'm a minister of the gospel standing here preaching to you today. **Yes, Jesus does call us to comfort hurting people.**

End I.

Move II.

But any hint of adversity, and we're ready to quit. We start out with a lot of enthusiasm, **but it doesn't take much** to burst our bubble. **Ministry is** supposed to be invigorating, isn't it? **Ministry should** make you feel good about yourself, shouldn't it? **When you're in God's** will, every day is sunny and the birds are always singing, aren't they?

I once had a person taking a course at the district's lay servant academy email me some questions the students were to ask their pastor. The questions dealt with partnerships between pastors and laity in ministry. The final question was, **"What kind of personal and spiritual qualities are needed to be a partner in ministry?"** My answer centered first on the persons' abilities and motivations. **Does the person** have the God given talents needed for the task at hand? **Does the person** have a genuine heart for service? **Is the service** its own reward or dose the person have an ulterior motive? **And then my answer** went to the person's spiritual maturity. **For me the easiest** way to sense spiritual maturity is by perseverance. A spiritually mature person is not easily discouraged. He or she can shake off unjust criticism. A spiritual mature person is acquainted with the realities of suffering. **In Romans 5:3-4 (NRSV)** the Apostle Paul writes, **"But we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."** A spiritual mature person has hope because he or she is counting on God to reveal the future. **They aren't quitters;** they just quietly persevere.

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Anyone who quits at the slightest hint of adversity still has some maturing to do. They aren't yet ready to be partners in ministry. God's still working on developing their sense of hope. **Sadly, many people** in the church are stuck in a state of cynicism. Everything is always "gloom and doom." The pastor can't do anything right. The church leaders can't do anything right. **They'd jump ship** if they could only find the life raft. **This negative spirit** permeates though many churches **particularly here in Western Pennsylvania.**

But you know it's not like that everywhere. **My oldest son Tim** and his wife Natalie are in the Susquehanna Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church and **my middle son Tom** and his wife Amy lived in the North Carolina Conference for a while, and things aren't nearly as dejected and cynical in those conferences as they are in ours. **There, people are optimistic** and upbeat, and many churches are growing. **You know**, it can be that way here again. Sure, we've been suffering in Western Pennsylvania, **but that suffering is developing** perseverance, and that perseverance, character, and that character hope.

God is calling each of us to grow in our faith. God desires that we become spiritually mature. **But any hint of adversity, and many of us are still ready to quit.**

End II.

Move III.

And you can hear Jesus sighing over us. Erie, Erie, “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” (Luke 13:34a, NRSV). You might think it harsh to substitute our name in the place of the name of the holy City of Jerusalem, but I asked you, don’t you think Jesus laments at the way this city and even this congregation have treated some of its leaders. **Erie** is great at criticizing everyone which drives the most competent leaders away. **And this congregation** hasn’t always been kind to its leaders, including its pastors.

In the 1990s, my home church in Indiana, Pennsylvania, developed a reputation for being rough on its leaders. For about ten years, **it managed to chew up and spit out** one pastor after pastor and one church leader after another. Negativity and cynicism were everywhere. I was a layperson at the time, but I could see that we were slowly killing ourselves by figuratively killing all of the prophets God was sending us. **The only way** this could stop, was for the congregation to change its attitude. **In Hebrew, the word repent** means to turn, you turn from the wrong way toward the right way; **you turn from** doing things your way to doing things God’s way. It took a few years, but slowly attitudes began to change. Negativity and cynicism gave way to optimism and hope. The church turned the corner and **became a thriving congregation** with some 750 people at multiple worship services held in a couple of locations around town. **I’ve staying in contact** with those former pastors, the ones the congregation chewed up and spit out, **and to a person** they all when on to serve congregations who prospered under their leadership. But of course, it’s always easier to blame the pastor and the rest of the church leadership, than it is to blame ourselves.

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I think as a church we're already turning the bend. Most have let go of the past. **You've heard Jesus' sighs** and you've responded by turning from the old way that was leading to stagnation and death, toward God's way that's leading to vibrancy and life. Sure, we all slip back into our old ways from time to time. But little by little and bit by bit, **God is transforming** us into a people who care not only for ourselves, **but also for** all of the hurting people in the community around us.

At administrative meetings I've said again and again that a church has to do more than just pay its bills and keep its building maintained. That might be good enough for a museum, but that's not good enough for a church. God wants a church to do a lot more than survive; God wants a church to thrive. **God wants our church** to share our passion for Jesus Christ with Erie's next generations. That's our mission, and it's a mission we're beginning to fully embrace.

Some people are a little slower turning than others are. They need a little more time. But God's not finished with any of us yet. **2 Peter 3:9 (NRSV)** says, **"The Lord is ... patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."** Occasionally some of us slip back into old self-destructive attitudes. **And, when we do, you can hear Jesus sighing over us.**

End III.

Move IV.

So, find courage in the shelter of his wings. Our Bible lesson today is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus uses a famine metaphor to describe his care for God's people. **“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”** (Luke 13:34b, NRSV). I can think of no more comforting place to be than snuggled safely under Jesus' wings. No harm can befall us there.

When I study and mediate on a Bible lesson, I try to discern the driving theme of the passage. If you were to read Luke 13:24 in isolation, **the theme** would have to be comfort. **In fact**, the Dove winning vocalist and songwriter, Kathy Troccoli, wrote a song titled, *“In the Shelter of Your Wings,”* and included it **on her album titled “Comfort.”** Listen as I read the words of the first verse of Kathy Troccoli's song:

**When I'm walking through the valley of the shadow of disaster,
my dreams and broken visions at my feet.
Through the disarray, I still can hear the voice of my master,
singing, softly, to remind me.**

And now listen to Kathy Troccoli sing the chorus:

{Play *“The Shelter of Your Wings Clip.mp3”* [0:27]}

I'm surrounded by your grace, in this dark and lonely place,
In the midst of shattered dreams, I'm in the shelter of your wings.

Those are truly comforting lyrics. But as much as I love the feeling those lyrics instill, **when I read the passage** in Luke as a whole, I think you're led one-step further. As you pause and are refreshed in the shelter of Jesus' wings, something else happens. **You begin** to feel secure and find courage. You begin to have hope for the future. You begin to dream happy dreams again. Quite simply, you begin to you take heart and find courage. **So, the full** sense of this passage is one of both comfort and courage.

We need to be careful not to confuse the “verb” comfort **with the** “adjective” comfortable. **As we engage** ourselves in Jesus’ mission to comfort hurting people, we may find that we **don’t always feel comfortable** ourselves. But because we’re secure in the shelter of Jesus’ wings, we can endure any suffering that might be required. **Remember Jesus** certainly wasn’t comfortable dying our death on the cross, but Jesus never lost hope, he always had courage.

Please pray this prayer with me:

Loving God,
we live in the shelter of your wings,
where we’re snuggled safe and secure.
And where we find the courage
to endure any discomfort required
for the sake of your kingdom.
May we be instruments of your grace,
and incubators of your comfort,
to the hurting people all around us.
In Christ’s Name we pray, Amen.

That’s the sense of our Bible lesson today. A sense of comfort not for the sake of being comfortable, but for the sake of having the courage needed to comfort others. **So, yes, we do find courage in the shelter of his wings.**

End IV.

Conclusion: Holding that man from the accident taught me that providing comfort to someone else can sometimes be downright uncomfortable. **Yet, Jesus does call us to comfort hurting people.** Jesus never said it wouldn't ever hurt. Jesus simply asks us take up our crosses and follow him. **But any hint of adversity, and many of us are ready to quit.** We think that whenever you're in God's will, every day must be sunny, and the birds must always be singing. **And you can hear Jesus sighing over us.** *"You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."* **So, find courage in the shelter of his wings.** Jesus doesn't comfort us to make us comfortable. No, Jesus comforts us to give us the courage to endure the discomfort needed to comfort others. So, let's live fully in *"The Shelter of His Wings."*

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Thank you for sending your son Jesus, who willingly endured the pain of the cross for the comfort of our souls. May we always find courage in the shelter of his wings. **Amen!**

10:30 Closing Hymn: "God of Grace, and God of Glory" Red Hymnal No. 577
All Four Verses

Sending Forth: O God, grant us wisdom; grant us courage, for the facing of this hour. Go forth and willingly endure all the discomfort necessary to bring Christ's comfort to the hurting people all around you. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**