drew crowds away from the temple authorities. It was only a matter of time before things in the Holy City got crazy for Jesus and his crew, and on Maundy Thursday, things started to boil over.

**Nazareth** seems like a natural, safe spot. It was Jesus’ hometown, the place where he played as a boy and learned the carpentry trade. Nazareth was home to family and friends who knew him simply as “Jesus the son of Joseph” and Mary. Certainly, Jesus could continue the ministry there, free from threats and with incredible effectiveness, right? Maybe. And maybe not, because going home can be difficult. Just ask the small-town boy who made it as a big-city lawyer but is still just “one of the boys” when he visits Mom and Dad. Or the little girl who went to college and earned a medical degree but is still “little Sarah” to the folks back home. The people who watched us grow up may struggle to see just who we’ve become because they are most comfortable with who we used to be.

Jesus experienced this early in his ministry. Reading from the Scriptures in the synagogue, Jesus publicly proclaimed that he was, in fact, the long-awaited Redeemer of God’s people promised by the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:16-29; Isaiah 61:1-2). Yet even with Jesus’ “home-synagogue advantage,” the Nazareth crowd did not react kindly. They drove Jesus out of the town to the edge of a cliff and tried to kill him. Jesus was right when he said, “[N]o prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” (Luke 4:24). The folks in Nazareth did not want to deal with Jesus’ claims that “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). They wanted the Jesus who was a good man who made his folks proud, not a “miracle-working” Jesus or a “one-and-only Messiah” Jesus. This new Jesus made them uncomfortable. So, Nazareth was not a safe place for Jesus.

Some 40 miles northwest of Nazareth was the region of **Caesarea Philippi** where the worship of anything in any manner was commonplace. Among the myriad of pagan sects, Jesus and the disciples would be just one crazy cult among many. Such an open, accepting place would be the perfect place for Jesus to set up shop, right? Not so, since tolerant folks who embrace the “all-roads-lead-to-the-same-God” fallacy are often the same people who are incredibly intolerant of those who argue that Jesus is only way, and truth, and life; and “No one comes to the Father except through [him]” (John 14:6). Jesus’ message, while laden with love and acceptance of all, was certainly narrow, not broad, when discussing how one “comes to the Father.”

It was in Caesarea Philippi, to the epicenter of pagan worship, that Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:29). Later, Jesus spoke to a crowd gathered to worship false gods promising fertility and pleasure, and shouted these words: “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:36-38).

People who find a god they enjoy, a god who satisfies their every whim, do not take it well when others tell them they are wrong. For Jesus to find a hazard-free home in Caesarea Philippi then, he would have to become some kind of “all-paths-are-good” Jesus, or an “it doesn’t matter who you worship so long as you are a good person” kind of Jesus. He would be someone other than the Jesus we see boldly teaching, preaching, and healing in the gospels to avoid being persecuted and “hated.” Caesarea Philippi is no place for our Savior.

The truth is, no matter where Jesus went with his message, at some point he would be met with hostility. Conflict with people who would refuse to confess him as Savior was inevitable. Then, as now: there are those who want a human Jesus, not a divine Jesus. There are those who would rather make a Jesus in their own image, a Jesus who allows them to keep worshiping their own gods. There are those who want a Jesus who is a good teacher of truth, but not the ultimate embodiment of it. There are those who would rather kill Jesus and stay contented as they are, than bow to him and be transformed.

Knowing this, Jesus gathered the disciples in the upper room to say goodbye. Jesus never tried to avoid the conflict by skipping to some “safer” town: he confronted it and crushed it. When people who refuses to see the real Jesus, he chose not to run and to stay faithful, you to stick to the truth, and to lovingly, and boldly, prove them wrong. For Jesus that meant staying in Jerusalem, amid the danger, and ultimately heading to the cross. It was there, on the cross, where the conflict between who Jesus claimed to be and who the world wanted him to be came to a head. It was there, as the world killed a man people thought to be a lunatic and a liar, that Jesus initiated his reign as Lord, shedding blood for their sins and procuring their future in God’s family. And when those who killed him confidently proclaimed him “wrong,” three days later Jesus quietly but confidently came back, assuring the world that everything he said was true.

On this night, however, Peter, sensing some serious trouble and not knowing what was in store or how necessary it was, urged Jesus to take him along for the journey. Jesus responded by saying, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward” (John 13:36). It was necessary for Jesus to confront sin and death on his own. But very soon, Peter’s time to confront it would come, as would ours.

This is our time to die: to the world, to sin, to our selfish needs. Like Jesus, we must confront the conflict around us, as well as the conflict within us. We must confess that we desire a Jesus other than the one we are given in the gospels. We must confess our desire for a Jesus who meets our needs and lets us love other gods rather than a Jesus who rules our lives, drives us to repentance, and forgives our sin. We must face the fact that often the person who presents the greatest hostility to Jesus in our life is us! As a result, we are the ones who need to die to our earthly desires, our weird and wicked ways, so the reality of Christ and the truth of Christ might live in us and be shown through us (1 Corinthians 15:31).

For Jesus and for his followers, there is no hiding out in hazard-free zones or finding the safest place to live. Instead, he and we head right into the action with the unfiltered message of forgiveness and grace found only in God’s Son. But on this Maundy Thursday, it is time for foot washings, a final meal, and a few goodbyes. It is safe now. It is quiet now. But once Jesus’ disciples leave this room, for each one the confrontation will begin.

Prayer: Gracious God, as those who strive to follow Jesus in our living and to trust your power in our dying, we gather to reflect upon the life that ended on a cross. We recognize in ourselves the strengths and weaknesses of Jesus’ disciples: although they loved him, they disappointed and failed him. And yet, gathering with these imperfect friends at this last meal Jesus washed their feet in service, and extended the bread and cup to each. Jesus called them to love one another, invited them to share in his life, and asked them to accept the difficult road ahead. We are humbled, honored, and inspired by the deep love Christ extended to the world, and we take seriously the calling to be the body of Christ today. Forgive us when we disappoint and fail you; and guide us back to a place of trust and faithful living. Grant us the vision to see the world as you see it, with love and compassion for each person and all your creation. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

**Sources:**

* “United States death map revealed.” International Journal of Health Geographics, December 17, 2008.
* ScienceDaily, sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081216201408.htm Retrieved October 14, 2009.
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**No Safety for a Savior**

Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2021 John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

I want to re-imagine the days leading up to Good Friday, and I am going to suggest that Jesus did not intend to die. At least not yet. I want to propose that on Maundy Thursday, Jesus needed more time. God sent Jesus “to save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21), but he needs a few more months of amazing miracles and moving messages to convince the world that he is the “Messiah, the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16).

What if rather than gathering with his disciples to serve them and to say “goodbye,” Jesus gathered them together to devise a plan and plot a route to safety. Where could Jesus go without being killed for saying things such as “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), or “I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (v. 10). Where could Jesus and his friends flee, still telling those around him that he is the Savior and yet, for a little bit longer, be guaranteed a haven? Where can a Savior find safety?

Some time ago, University of South Carolina scientists gathered decades of death-related data to determine the most perilous places in America. They created a county-by-county map measuring the risk of hazard-related deaths due to natural disasters or extreme weather. The study concluded that there are certain areas of the country to avoid if you are looking to extend your days. For example, hazard mortality is most prominent in the South, where scorching summer heat, hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding along the Gulf Coast are all a reality. Even in the Midwest, where we think life is safer and saner than in the coastal areas, there is a significant chance of a hazard-related death, as people experience the combination of blistering hot summers, perilously cold winters, and Wizard of Oz-style twisters. Surprisingly, the research points to Southern California as a “safe area” with its temperate climate and a lower-than-normal risk of a crazy, weather- or natural-disaster-related death. That is, when the region is not on fire or being rattled by earthquakes. Go figure.

But back to Jesus. Where could go to best avoid the “hazard” of being persecuted? “[T]hey persecuted me,” Jesus said. “They hated me without a cause” (John 15:20, 25). Where would Jesus be least likely to die for preaching the gospel and healing the sick? Jerusalem was too dangerous with the Sadducees and the Pharisees who hated Jesus. Jerusalem had a short fuse for religious nonconformists like Jesus, especially when they successfully