

33 A.D.
Luke 13:31-35

33 A. D.—a man named Tiberius is emperor of Rome. He controls an area from Portugal to Iraq, from England to the Sudan. Though powerful, life hasn't been easy for him. He grew up in a dysfunctional family. How's this for a soap opera? His father was fleet captain for Julius Caesar and his mother was the beautiful Livia. When Augustus became emperor after Caesar, he forced Tiberius's father to divorce Livia so she could become Augustus' third wife. Tiberius and his brother Drusus came to become a part of Augustus' household. Tiberius married Vispania. Augustus' daughter, Julia, lost her husband. Augustus forced Tiberius to divorce Vispania and married Julia, who was the Paris Hilton of her day. Grieved by the loss of Vispania, Tiberius went off to fight successfully with the Roman army. Only after Augustus exiled Julia did Tiberius return to Rome. He was adopted by Augustus. Since Augustus' three other choices to succeed him had died, Tiberius took over at age 56 when Augustus died.

Overwhelmed by the administration of a vast empire, Tiberius left Rome for the resort island of Capri. He had a beautiful palace, the Villa Jovis, built on a 900 foot cliff from which he could see a magnificent view of the mainland. The island could only be approached by one small beach. He turned over most of the administration of the empire to Sejanus. Sejanus gradually wielded more and more power while Tiberius was isolated. He arranged to poison Tiberius' son Drusus and seduced Drusus' wife, Livilla. Tiberius found out about this and cleverly unseated Sejanus by giving him a long speech to read to the Senate. At first the speech praised Sejanus then ended up condemning him. He was executed. Chaos spread over the empire as Tiberius scurried to regain control. Anyone having anything to do with Sejanus was suspect.

That included a man hundreds of miles to the east in the town called Caesarea in Palestine. His name is Pontius Pilate. He is the Roman governor of Palestine. But he has ruled awkwardly. He is suspected because he served in the army under Sejanus. In his efforts to flatter Tiberius, he has made mistakes. He placed Roman military images in honor of Tiberius in Jerusalem. This is an affront to Jews as our pictures of humans are an affront to traditional Moslems. Thinking he has learned his lesson, Pilate places shields with no images, but with inscriptions to Tiberius with religious associations, in Jerusalem. But this also gets him into trouble. Tiberius finds out. Pilate is this close to losing his position and honor.

How did Tiberius find out about this? North of where Pilate lives on the west side of the Sea of Galilee lives Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea. His father, Herod, had ruled all of Palestine. But he only is a tetrarch, in charge of only ¼ of his father's kingdom. What he lacks in real power, he tries to make up for in cleverness. He keeps up secret communication with Tiberius, hoping to get Pilate in even greater trouble so he might get control of all of Palestine.

South of Galilee is the city of Jerusalem. Joseph Caiaphas the high priest lives here. He is high priest by appointment by the Roman governor. But with Pilate on thin ice with Tiberius, he sees that he has the opportunity to increase his power.

Back near the Sea of Galilee another man is on his way to Jerusalem. He has no plan to gain power or to plot against anyone. Some people come to him and tell him that Antipas wants to kill him. He replies, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem.”

Tiberius sees his destiny as restoring power to his family so that he could leave his empire to his nephew Caligula. Pilate sees his destiny as restoring his honor with Tiberius and getting to a better post than Palestine. Antipas sees his destiny in restoring the throne of his father, Herod. Caiaphas sees his destiny in being the voice, not the Roman governor, in what happens in Jerusalem. But one man seems to come into the middle of all of this. It is that man from Galilee, the man, Jesus.

Jesus seems to menace Antipas. Antipas has thoughts that Jesus could be his old nemesis, John the Baptist, come back to life. John had confronted Antipas about the evil of marrying his brother’s wife, Herodius. Caiaphas will also see Jesus as a threat when Jesus comes to Jerusalem and gets the Passover crowd excited. Jerusalem, a crowded city of 80,000, swells to accommodate up to a million pilgrims each year during Passover. So many of these pilgrims will hail Jesus as God’s King who has come to rescue them from Rome. But if this happens, then the Romans will come without asking any questions and wipe out Jerusalem. Pilate doesn’t have anything against Jesus; but if there is any kind of uprising in Palestine, he will be blamed. Rome is always quick to quell any revolt against its authority; but war is expensive, like it was in Iraq and Afghanistan. Good governors are expected to find peaceful solutions. If Jesus’ death means keeping the peace, Pilate will let that happen. Tiberius is busy enough undoing the mess made by Sejanus. He won’t shed any tears if an obscure teacher in Palestine is crucified.

Jesus heads for Jerusalem. He knows all those events facing Tiberius, Pilate, Antipas, and Caiaphas will meet with Him. But He has a destiny beyond all of them. While Caiaphas thinks that Jesus’ death will keep power with the high priest and his family, he doesn’t know that in less than 40 years Jerusalem will be destroyed by the Romans and the temple and priesthood done away with. While Antipas plots to gain more power, he doesn’t know that he will be replaced by his nephew, Agrippa. Pilate may think he has gained peace, but he is remembered by millions as the man under whom Jesus died. Tiberius thinks he has established his empire, but he will give it to Caligula who will set an all-time standard for debauchery only rivaled by Nero. Jesus’ destiny is the cross. But by that cross Jesus meets head-on with all evil, pain, corruption, and suffering in this world. He dies with it so that your sin and my sin can be put on that cross with Him.

And that brings us to another character in this story—you and me. What is our destiny? Is it to seek power as Caiaphas did? Is it to connive to have things our way like Antipas? Is it to flatter and negotiate our way through life as Pilate did so that we don’t get into trouble? Is it to find peace in our lives as Tiberius tried to by shutting ourselves into our own “Capris” in our climate-controlled, electronically-entertained houses? Because if we see that as our destiny,

then all we will end up with is death. We will be like Jerusalem about which Jesus said, “Look, your house is left to you desolate.” That is our destiny unless we look to Jesus’ destiny—what took Him to the cross for us.

The old spiritual says, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Indeed we were. 33 A.D. was not just something for the history books. Jesus’ history - His story - became my story, your story through baptism. Paul says we were buried with Jesus through baptism. In Colossians he says, “We have died, and our life is hidden with Christ in God the Father.” Our destiny is with Jesus. Where He goes we follow. As He died, so our sins, our old self died with Him on that cross. As He was rejected, we will too as we live for Him. We won’t always “fit in” because we care for those neglected by society. We have a message people often don’t want to hear. And we still go where He has gone before us in His resurrection. We live, not bide our time and make the most of what we can do before we die. No, we live empowered by the certain hope that He is coming again to destroy evil.