

**“HE WOULD HAVE GATHERED YOU...”**  
**Lk 13:31-35; Jer 26:8-15; Phil 3:17-4:1**

January 28, 1986, started out like many days for me on my vicarage at Hephatha Lutheran Church in Anahelm, California. I was at about the halfway point of my vicarage. I showered, dressed, and was enjoying my morning coffee and was watching “Good Morning LA” with Bob Jamison on KTLA, channel 5, when I heard the news and saw the footage of the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster and the loss of all seven crew members.

As you all know, we later learned that all this could have been prevented. Engineers at Morton Thiokol, the company that manufactured the shuttle's solid rocket boosters, expressed serious concerns about those O-rings, which were designed to seal the joints between the booster segments. They warned that the cold temperatures predicted for launch day could cause the O-rings to fail, leading to a catastrophic explosion.

Despite the warnings, NASA overruled their objections. There was pressure to proceed with the launch, driven by scheduling and public relations concerns.

This is a stark reminder of the consequences of ignoring expert warnings. It shows how people can ignore the messenger, when that data conflicts with their own desires.

Have you ever wondered why Jerusalem always rejected and even harmed the prophets God sent? It's really a very similar scenario! They just didn't want to hear the message. So, they silenced the messenger.

Being a prophet might sound like a prestigious job, but it wasn't glamorous. You were called to deliver difficult truths, often facing hostility. It was a life filled with danger. Very few prophets died of old age.

Take Jeremiah for example. We heard about him this morning. God sent Jeremiah to call His people to repentance, but, because they had persistently turned away, God warned them of coming discipline. He told them an enemy would invade, defeat them, and leave Jerusalem desolate.

The people were angry. They were ready to take his life. **“Don't like the message? Kill the messenger.”** And this isn't an isolated incident. This pattern repeated itself countless times throughout Israel's history.

And let's be honest, who really enjoys being called to repentance? No one likes to be told they're wrong. I don't! And what's our immediate reaction when we hear those words? We dig in our heels, don't we? We defend ourselves, and justify our actions. But actually repent? Change our ways? “No thank you,” we think, “I'd really rather not.”

So, you'd think Lent, with its emphasis on repentance, would be the least popular time of year... but it's not! Even those who aren't particularly religious, still choose to give something up for Lent. It seems a bit contradictory, doesn't it? If we dislike repentance so much, why the Lenten sacrifices?

Well, often, it isn't actually about repentance at all! It's more about atonement. People are trying to pay for their own sins, by giving something up, rather than truly changing their hearts. It's a substitute, a shortcut... and, a rather inadequate one at that.

We see a similar dynamic when people make promises to God, vowing to improve themselves. **“I'll pray more, give more, help more, love more, read the Bible more, volunteer more...”** But you'll notice something missing, won't you? **“Repent more”** rarely makes the cut. Because, deep down, that's what we're trying to avoid.

We try to atone for our shortcomings not by changing our hearts, but by piling on good deeds. We think, “If I do enough good, maybe I can outweigh the bad.” But it doesn't quite work that way.

And then we see another trend: public apologies for all kinds of things. Apologies for our nation's history, for the actions of past generations, for systemic oppression, for slavery, for inequality... But, is this truly repentance?

Often, these apologies are for actions committed by others, for broad societal issues, or for a vision of how we wish things were different. But while acknowledging wrongdoing is important, it's not the same as personal repentance, is it?

Jesus spoke to those who saw the sins of others, but ignored their own. **“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't notice the log that is in your own eye?”** True repentance starts with looking inward, with acknowledging our own personal failings, and seeking to change. Otherwise, it's just words.

True repentance, is saying, **“I'm a poor, miserable sinner.”** Not **“we,”** not **“they,”** but **“I.”** It's acknowledging that the fault lies within me and that I can't earn my way out of this predicament—that no amount of good deeds can erase my disobedience. In fact, I'm completely powerless to fix it. And because of my sins against God and against others, I deserve death. Now and forever. Period.

That's a hard truth to swallow, but there's no way around it. And this isn't because we have a cruel, tyrannical God who delights in our humiliation. It's because we have a loving God who desperately desires to forgive us, and **gather us under His protective wings,** and to give us abundant life.

That's why He sent His prophets, and why He continues to call us to repentance. It's not about forcing us to do something unpleasant; it's about giving us the very thing we desperately need: **forgiveness.**

If there were any other way, we'd try it. And we do try! **We run around like frantic chicks in a barnyard, trying every alternative, ignoring the mother hen's call to safety.** We're blind to the danger circling above, the satanic hawk with its sharp talons waiting for its moment... until it's too late.

And so it was in Jeremiah's time, and again in Jesus' time. **“Things are going just fine, Jeremiah... We were doing perfectly well without you, Jesus. We've got this. We're handling it.”** They thought.

But with every call rejected, every warning ignored, every messenger silenced, the satanic hawk drew nearer and nearer. They were blind to the coming doom, convinced of their own self-sufficiency. But refusing to repent isn't hurting God. Refusing to repent is only hurting yourself!

Jesus sees the danger. He sees that everything isn't fine. And so He sent His prophets. That's why He came Himself. That's why His words in our Gospel are filled with such sadness for Jerusalem.

And what about you? What about your life? Your old sins, your new sins, your stubborn sins, those sins where you reject God's Word and create your own path? When confronted, do you lash out? Accuse others? Deny your wrongdoing? Do you try to defend and justify your actions?

Do you even see the satanic hawk circling above? Or perhaps you do, but you think, **“He won't get me. He'll snatch someone else. I'll be fine.”** That's a dangerous gamble, isn't it?

There's only one sanctuary, one place of true safety: **under the wings of Jesus' forgiveness.** Only His forgiveness can lift the condemnation of our sins. Only His resurrection can conquer the death that awaits us all. And it's only because He allowed the satanic hawk to sink its talons into Him that we are safe.

As we sang in the Introit today, ***'the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.'*** Your reproach, your condemnation, your death—He took them upon Himself. He bore them so that His praise, His victory, His life could be given to you who **find refuge under His forgiving wings.**

Jeremiah warned the people that if they shed his innocent blood, they would bear the guilt themselves and be held accountable. But when the Son of God willingly laid down His life on the cross, it was precisely so that His innocent blood would be poured out for us. Not blood of condemnation, but blood of atonement.

So when we resist repentance, we're rejecting the very blood that cleanses our sins—the forgiveness we desperately need... and that the Father longs to give us... enough to send His Son to die on that cross. And turning away from the forgiveness Jesus so wants for you that He willingly made that sacrifice for you! And yet, we still resist? It truly makes no sense, does it?

The Apostle Paul says in our epistle: ***“Your citizenship is in heaven.”*** If we forget that, if we convince ourselves that we belong only to this world, we'll start living as if this life is the only reality. We'll fix our minds on earthly things and become obsessed with our possessions, our status, our comfort here, seeking our joy and fulfillment in fleeting, worldly things. And instead of seeking repentance, we'll do whatever it takes to advance our own interests in this temporary existence.

But what if there's more to existence than what we see around us? What if Jesus truly did rise from the dead, and what if He's promised us that same glorious resurrection? And what if that incredible future is ours **when we find refuge under the wings of Jesus' forgiveness?**

Suddenly, our earthly possessions, our fleeting status, our temporary comfort—they don't seem quite as important, do they? Our joy and satisfaction shift from the here and now to Jesus and the eternal citizenship He's secured for us in a kingdom that knows no end.

That's a dramatically different perspective... And one that makes repentance a little less overwhelming. Not easy, mind you, but a lot easier.

Think of it like this: If your citizenship is in heaven, then the church is a colony of heaven, an outpost of forgiveness and life planted right in the heart of a world consumed by sin and death. That means we shouldn't expect an easy ride. We're surrounded by the wreckage of sin, pain, suffering, evil, sadness and death.

Yet, in the midst of it all we're **sheltered under the refuge of our Savior's wings.** We may be wounded, but we're not destroyed. We may face death, but our true life remains untouched. We may grieve, but our joy endures. Because this earthly realm isn't the whole of our existence. Our true citizenship resides in heaven.

And from that heavenly realm, we eagerly await our Savior, on that Day, when our frail, suffering, rebellious bodies ravaged by disease and decay, are transformed like His own resurrected body.

The people in Jeremiah's time, and again in Jesus' time, clung to the Temple and Jerusalem, believing nothing could harm them within those walls. But Jesus is the true sanctuary. In Him, **under His wings, we find true safety.**

The Temple and Jerusalem were sanctuaries not because of their physical structures, but because of the One who lived within them: the gracious God who offered forgiveness and who now come in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

In Him, we're safe. No matter the city, no matter the country, whether alive or facing death, because Jesus' reign, power, and authority extend over all.

Baptized into Christ, you are now a citizen of heaven, even as you live in this earthly colony. The Holy Spirit, given to you in baptism, works within you, guiding you to repent and to rely not on your own strength, your sacrifices, or good deeds, **but only on the protecting wings of Jesus' forgiveness.**

And He leads you here, to this altar, to receive the innocent blood shed for you, giving

you the very life you need. And so, here at this altar, you sing: ***“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”*** Because, by faith, you see Him here, His very Body and Blood present in this bread and wine.

And so, understanding this incredible truth, you'll naturally give. Instead of clinging tightly to your possessions, your status, your comfort... instead of chasing joy and fulfillment in this fleeting world, you'll generously share with others. Because you hold something far greater, something that makes all earthly things fade in comparison. You have a glorious Savior, who promises to share His glory with you.

So, let's repent. It's not a burden, but a blessing. That's where we find life – receiving our life from Jesus. No substitutes, just pure, unadulterated forgiveness. In the name of Jesus, Amen.