

About 2,300 years ago a young man by the name of Alexander walked into the history books when he led his army on a 22,000 mile march for over 13 years from his home in Greece all the way to India. If you wanted to travel that far in the United States on foot you would have to make four round trips from Los Angeles To New York. This march wasn't just impressive because it was far-reaching but because it was unstoppable. Alexander didn't just travel 22,000 miles, he fought his way through it and never once met an enemy that he didn't defeat. The only reason he didn't go farther was that his soldiers became homesick and wanted to return to Greece.

Alexander's march was far-reaching in another way; some 2,300 years later it still affects us today. That's remarkable when you consider that Alexander never set foot in the United States. His far-reaching forays made Greek culture and language the standard of the world for over three centuries. Because of that we now have many Greek words in our language - words like biology, philosophy, telephone, and telescope. Our art, architecture, and democratic form of government have all been greatly influenced by the Greeks as well. If Alexander had not conquered the world, the Persians (most modern day Iranians) would have conquered it, and our language, art, and government today would have a Persian tinge, not a Greek one. What Alexander accomplished is impressive especially when you consider that he did it all by age 33! It's no wonder he's called Alexander the Great.

About 330 years after Alexander the Great died another remarkable 33 year old embarked on a march. Like Alexander's march this one was unstoppable. But because this march didn't seem to be nearly as far-reaching as Alexander's (only 75 miles in all – The Villages to Daytona Beach) it was not appreciated then and often remains unappreciated today. That's why today I'm inviting you to come with me to Palestine to view Jesus' unstoppable and often unappreciated march to Jerusalem. Under inspection we'll see that it's a march worth saluting.

Jesus began his march to Jerusalem from Galilee. As he headed south the Pharisees brought word that Herod wanted to kill him and they urged Jesus to leave the vicinity at once. What's wrong with that picture? Since when were the Pharisees concerned about Jesus' well being? They had wanted to kill him from the very beginning so why should they warn Jesus about a plot against his life now?

We really don't know what the Pharisees were up to. Perhaps they made the story up to frighten Jesus into hurrying to Jerusalem where they were waiting to silence him once and for all? Or maybe this was Herod's way of scaring Jesus out of his territory? We're told that when Herod heard about everything that Jesus was doing he thought that it might be John the Baptist come back to life (Lk. 9:7). That was a scary thought for Herod because he had been the one who had ordered John's execution.

While we really don't know what was going on Jesus was unfazed. He said to the Pharisees, "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!" (Lk. 13:32, 33)

Jesus' reply spoke to both the Pharisees and Herod. He showed that he wasn't afraid of either of them. Why should he be? He had the power to drive out demons! Sure, Herod might be crafty like a fox and he may have arranged John the Baptist's execution but that wasn't going to cause Jesus to change his plans. He would continue to drive out demons, and heal the sick where

he wanted, when he wanted and no one was going to stop him – not even Herod. And as for the Pharisees? Well, they would get their shot at Jesus soon enough but not until he was willing.

Of course the Pharisees and Herod weren't the first to try to get Jesus off track. Last week we heard how Satan tempted Jesus early in his ministry. In one of those temptations Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and promised to give those to him if Jesus would only bow down and worship him. Was it tempting? Sure it was. Satan wanted Jesus to think that this was the "easy" way out. Instead of having to put up with slow disciples and vindictive enemies Jesus could enjoy power and prestige if only he would only bow down. Thankfully Jesus blew Satan off as he did Herod and the Pharisees. Nothing, not even Satan was going to stop his march to Jerusalem where he would die for the sins of the world.

But why Jerusalem? Why was Jesus so determined to march there? First of all he had prophesied that he would die in Jerusalem so he needed to keep his word (Matt. 16:21). Jerusalem was also the home of God's temple and the place where all sacrifices were to be made. What better place for the Lamb of God to sacrifice his life for the sins of the world? No, it's not surprising that Jesus would want to die in Jerusalem but it was ironic because Jerusalem means "City of Peace." Jerusalem was anything but a city of peace when it came to the way it treated God's messengers. In our Old Testament lesson we heard how Jeremiah was persecuted there for preaching the truth. Tradition tells us that the prophet Isaiah was killed in Jerusalem by being sawed in two. And now Jerusalem would put God's own Son to death but in doing so would literally become a city of peace because Jesus' death paid for our sins and gives us peace with God.

Although Jesus' march to Jerusalem would bring peace to the whole world it was not appreciated by many during Jesus' time. As you can imagine, that made Jesus very sad. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, 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, but you were not willing!" (Lk. 13:34)

Like a hen that chases after her chicks to keep them from harm, Jesus had attempted to gather the people of Jerusalem under his protection but many refused. People like the Pharisees thought that they could get to heaven on their own terms. Others, like the unrepentant thief on the cross, thought that it was more fun to mock Jesus.

People haven't changed have they? A couple weeks ago I asked a man what he would say when he stood before God's judgment throne. He said that he wouldn't say a thing. He figured that God would accept him the way he was because he had been a decent fellow. When I encouraged him to learn from the Bible what God would say to that, he declined saying that religion, especially Christianity, was too restrictive. He was afraid that if he became a Christian, or even studied the Bible that it would take all the fun out of life.

I wonder if that isn't sometimes our take on God's Word? When you hear that Jesus wants to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks is your first impulse to run the other way because you don't want to be controlled? If so then you aren't getting the picture. When Jesus describes himself as a hen that gathers her chicks under her wings he's describing how he wants to protect, not restrict us. Perhaps the role Jesus plays as a hen can be best understood from this story. After a forest fire swept through Yellowstone National Park a few years ago a park ranger went out to survey the damage. As he walked through the woods he came across the charred carcass of a bird

huddled at the base of a tree. It didn't make sense. Why didn't this bird fly away to freedom when the fire threatened? When he nudged the carcass with his boot three chicks came scurrying out from underneath it. Now it made sense. The hen had not flown away because that would have meant certain death for her chicks. Therefore in an act of love she stood over her chicks shielding them from the fire with her wings even though it meant a horrible death for her.

Friends, that's what it means when Christ gathers us underneath his wings. He stood over us on the cross and died a horrible death so we would not have to. To think that Jesus wants to gather us to restrict our fun and freedom is absolute foolishness. Do you think that it's restrictive to hang out in the basement when there's a tornado threatening? Of course not! It's the wise thing to do.

Even God's law that tells us what to do and what not to do is not as restrictive as you might think. The law is the secret to a happy life. Life is a lot more fun when you obey your parents, as you'll end up avoiding a lot of mistakes they have made. Life is a lot more peaceful when you remain faithful to your spouse, as you won't have to deal with marital strife. Life is so much more worry free when you don't covet but remain thankful for what God has given you. God's law is like a guardrail on a road leading up a mountain. The guardrail doesn't restrict your car's freedom; it keeps it from losing it and going off the road and over a cliff.

If you have been tempted to put your relationship with God on the back burner until you get older, married, have kids, or retire don't be foolish. Trying God's patience by going out on your own is a dangerous thing. What do you think happened to any chicks that didn't want to find refuge under their mother's wing in that forest fire? The same happens to those who refuse Jesus' refuge. Jesus said, "Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Lk. 13:35). Because the Jews rejected him, Jesus pronounced judgment on them. In 70 AD their beloved house, the city of Jerusalem, was utterly destroyed by the Romans. Those who died without faith will see Christ again, but only as their judge.

Jesus' 75 mile march to Jerusalem might not seem as impressive as Alexander's 18,000 km incursion into India, but don't dismiss it as an unimportant sidelight to history. Jesus' march was actually much more far-reaching than Alexander's. The truth is, God used Alexander's march to prepare the world for Jesus' march. Through Alexander God put a common language and good roads in place so that the news of Jesus' death and resurrection could spread quickly throughout the world. What Alexander did has affected people for centuries, but what Jesus did affects every person that ever lived – both those who came before him and those of us who live after him. Jesus' march is unmatched because he didn't just go to Jerusalem; he marched to hell and back. And unlike Alexander who marched to make a name for himself, Jesus marched to make a name for us – "Children of God." So what do you think? Is Jesus' march worth saluting? May God grant that you think so. Amen.