

## The Journey Continues: Overlooking Zion

In the season of Lent, we remember the journey of Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward his suffering and death. In part, we do this so that the celebration of Easter, the triumph of Jesus' resurrection, will be all the more meaningful, just as we celebrate the bright dawn after a dark, stormy and fearful night. In part, we remember Jesus' journey so that we can examine our own. What lessons are here for our lives? Do we walk in the footsteps of Jesus? Can we? Or do we see ourselves reflected in other persons in this story?

This morning's passage in Luke is an odd and rather obscure little story. It begins with a warning about a plot to kill Jesus and then becomes a lament over the city of Jerusalem. Matthew's Gospel puts the second half, the lament, in a different context, during the events of Holy Week just days before Jesus' execution. In some ways, that makes more sense. It is almost as if Luke, in writing about Jesus' determination to go and face the fate he knows awaits him in Jerusalem, has jumped to thinking about remarks Jesus made about that city at another time. But we cannot know which of the evangelists had the story right and so we must take Luke on his own terms.

The beauty of this little story is that it gives us a very clear picture of two sides of Jesus' personality. First, there is his courage and determination. The gospels do not record many friendly interactions between Jesus and the Pharisees but our passage begins with what seems like a sincere effort by some of the Pharisees to keep Jesus out of danger. But Jesus will have none of it. We can only get a clear understanding of his response to their warning by understanding some rather idiomatic language that he used. First of all, there is his use of the word "fox" to describe Herod. In our European American culture, that word carries certain connotations. We admire foxes for their craftiness and their beauty. To be "as sly as a fox" or "crazy like a fox" can be considered positive attributes and which of us who remembers the 70s didn't want to be considered "foxy"? But there was probably none of that underlying positive in what Jesus said. In rabbinical literature, the word fox is often used as a term of contempt. Randall Buth's researches, particularly into the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, suggest that Jesus "was commenting on Herod's ineptitude... pedigree, moral stature and leadership." Buth recommends that we substitute for the word "fox" words like "poser" or "clown" or, keeping it in the animal kingdom, "weasel." Another commentator, the British scholar A.R.C. Leaney, cites an Aramaic idiom behind the Greek of Luke's repeated words, "today and tomorrow, and on the third day." Leaney says that this is better translated, "day by day, and one day soon." "Eventually," in other words, or perhaps "when I'm darn good and ready." "Go and tell Herod, that weasel, that I have things to do and that he can't stop me. When I'm ready, I'm going to Jerusalem. That's where God's prophets are killed." Jesus is not afraid of the petty tyrant who beheaded his cousin John, nor is he afraid to die. In fact, he is determined to go to Jerusalem even though he is certain he will be killed there.

I suspect that both the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples would have enjoyed his put-down of Herod, who was no friend to the intensely religious nor to the poor. But they would likely have all been surprised by Jesus' characterization of Jerusalem as "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." It was far more common to glorify Jerusalem, the ancient capital of David and Solomon's united Israel and the location of the great Temple of Yahweh, the house where God dwelt. Psalm 48 heralds Jerusalem as "city of our God, the city of the Great King" and Psalm 2 claims that God has marked Zion as his own holy hill. Today, Christians, Jews and

Muslims alike revere Jerusalem. Earlier, we sang yet another hymn by John Newton, the writer of “Amazing Grace.” “Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God.” A strong image in Christianity for years has been the idea that the church was the new Jerusalem, that by right belief and right actions we could create a paradise on earth that would be the true City of God. As a boy in England, I learned a hymn based on a poem by William Blake that rather famously promotes this idea. You may recognize at least part of the second verse: “Bring me my Bow of burning gold; Bring me my Arrows of Desire; Bring me my Spear; O clouds unfold! Bring me my Chariot of Fire! I will not cease from Mental strife, Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand, Till we have built Jerusalem In England’s green and pleasant Land.” Beginning in 1974, as he was starting his first campaign for President, the late President Reagan often quoted the early American Puritan leader John Winthrop who said, “We will be as a city upon a hill,” referencing Jerusalem as a model for the American Experiment. But Jesus had another viewpoint on Jerusalem. He thought of the city and remembered the mistreatment of Jeremiah, and the stoning of the prophet Zechariah during the reign of King Joash, and many, many more. Jesus remembered that the Holy City had often been less than faithful to God and God’s messengers, perhaps never as Holy as it claimed.

I mentioned earlier how this story reveals Jesus’ courage and determination. It also reveals his great compassion and tenderness. Can any of us fail to be moved by the image of the mother hen with her chicks? In a sermon on this passage, Barbara Brown Taylor describes the chapel of Dominus Flevit, “The Lord Wept”, nestled on the side of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kedron Valley from Jerusalem. It is built on the site traditionally held to be the place where Jesus spoke his words of lament and warning for Jerusalem. “On the front of the altar,” she describes, “is a picture of what never happened in that city. It is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them, with black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies. But, it never happened, and the picture does not pretend that it did. The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English they read, “Jerusalem, 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!” The last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks’ feet: *you were not willing.*”

It is an interesting juxtaposition of images. Jesus, the fiery prophet unafraid to taunt the tyrant Herod as an “egg-sucking weasel,” as we used to say down home, is also the tender mother hen. But then the hen is not afraid of the fox either, when it comes to protecting her babies. Those who have raised chickens can tell you, the mother hen will keep her chicks behind her wings and bare her breast to the fox, giving herself up to him so that he will be sated and leave without the smaller, weaker morsels. Again, from Barbara Brown Taylor: “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed -- but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand... Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her

own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first. Which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her -- wings spread, breast exposed -- without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but it does not change a thing. If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.”

Jesus knows that God’s limitless mothering compassion has been calling Her people to come and rest in Her care for centuries, and that the call has gone unanswered. He knows, too, that his call will go largely unanswered, that the people will hail his entry to the city, then turn on him when he does not meet their expectations. He knows clearly what those expectations are: for a hero-Messiah to deliver them from the Romans, to lead them into an imagined Golden Age when they and their city will be powerful and respected in the way of the world. They think it will prove that God dwells among them in the beautiful house on the hill but they are mistaken. That house is left to them – it is empty. God is not confined to the Holy of Holies or to Jerusalem or even to the people that God has chosen as set apart for Godself. The Spirit of God blows where it chooses, into the lives and hearts of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave or free. Jesus has been preaching an unexpected message all along and when he reaches his destination, they will kill him for it.

As we read this story, I’m sure we’d like to identify with Jesus, with his courage and with his compassion. We’d like to but would it be honest? If we’re realistic, we may find that we have much more in common with his listeners and with the people of Jerusalem. Those to whom Jesus spoke glorified Jerusalem, that city that killed the prophets. What do we glorify that is deadly? What do we celebrate that holds only emptiness? The dominant culture that surrounds us celebrates acquisition and specific, ever-changing definitions of physical beauty. Yet has anyone ever found true lasting meaning in that lifestyle? We could use society’s measuring sticks to show how important and independent we are but wouldn’t we really be better off seeking the shelter of God’s wings?

Or are we perhaps the murderers of prophets? Oh, I don’t think that any of us would actually take part in the lynching of someone who spoke against our lives but haven’t we all been guilty of casually dismissing a word of challenge or good advice? When we hear sermons or lessons on the call of God on our lives, when we read devotional books or the Bible, do we really let those messages sink in and change our lives or do we simply say “oh, wasn’t that interesting,” and then go back to life as usual?

I don’t mean to imply that any or all of us dismiss God from our lives arrogantly. Indeed, it may be just the opposite. It may be that we think so little of ourselves that we are so ashamed of the darkness we know to be in our hearts, that we can’t imagine that God would want anything to do with us. I found a poem this week by the 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet George Herbert that expresses this feeling:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack,  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

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If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd worthy to be here.  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.

The sorrow of the Lenten journey points always to the Good News – that God does love us and that God wants to cover us with wings of love, just like a hen with her chicks. Just like that mother hen, Jesus was willing to die for us, to relieve us from the rapacious teeth of sin and blame and brokenness. The proof of that love is here, on this table. Here we remember the body broken for us, the blood shed for us, all out of overwhelming love. No matter where we are in our lives, no matter our cares or our joys, Jesus calls us into relationship with him and with our Loving Creator. Jesus calls us into communion, here at this table, with each other and with his Spirit who, in the words of Gerard Manly Hopkins, “over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”