

Sermon for Lent 2, Lament over Jerusalem, March 13, 2022

This is an odd passage from the gospel. Some Pharisees come and warn Jesus to get away because Herod wants to kill him. And Jesus makes an odd, prophetic statement, that he will be busy today and tomorrow casting out demons and healing the sick, and on the third day he will be done. But still he must be on his way to Jerusalem because prophets can't be killed anywhere else.

It's interesting to note that the Pharisees are warning him here. Not all Pharisees were out to kill Jesus. We need to be careful not to think: Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes = Bad People. Like the rest of us they were a mixed bag, trying to figure things out as they went along. And here they warn Jesus about Herod wanting to kill him.

Now, Jesus is already on the way from Galilee (where Herod ruled) to Jerusalem. But he says to tell "that fox" that he is not leaving out of fear. He is going about his work, healing and freeing people, as usual. "Today, tomorrow and the next day" isn't meant literally, but it means "for a while yet." And he is on his way to Jerusalem, not to run away from Herod, but because he is a prophet and prophets can only die in Jerusalem.

Remember at the Transfiguration, Jesus was discussing his death in Jerusalem with Moses and Elijah. He knew that when he went to Jerusalem to offer them healing and freedom from their demons and eternal life, they would almost certainly reject him and kill him. He knew this, but he went anyway, because he felt in his bones that this was what God desired of him: to go to Jerusalem, the centre of Israel for over 800 years, and offer them the Kingdom of God. Because he loved them and desired their good.

And that leads to a lament. Jesus laments over Jerusalem: "O 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!" And now you will not see me until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Again, he speaks as a prophet, for himself, but also for God.

Over the centuries, God has loved Jerusalem and has sent them prophets to call them back to himself, to show them the way to freedom and peace, to the kingdom of God. Again and again, God has sent his prophets and they have been killed and stoned and disregarded and rejected. God's way has been rejected by them and, as St. Paul says, this can only end in disaster for them. And this time he is sending his Son, still loving them, never giving up on them, still wanting to heal them and free them and give them eternal life. Knowing the odds are not good that they'll accept this.

Jesus speaks in such tender words here. Have you ever seen a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings? I have. It's really sweet. You should google it and look at the pictures. She does it to keep them safe, out of sight of predators, out of the rain or strong sunshine. She puts her own body between them and danger of any kind. And they feel safe and secure there, warm and cared for. This is what God longs to do with Jerusalem, in this tender maternal image.

And that's after Jerusalem has rejected God so many times, ignored God's laws and killed God's prophets. God still yearns for them like a mother hen yearns for her chicks and is willing to put herself in harm's way to protect them from danger. And this is still true today, after they rejected Jesus and crucified him, like the other prophets. God still loves them. God is just like that.

Now this is good news for you and for me. Let me tell you a story. Our youth group used to discuss questions that the kids asked. One day the question was, "How many times will God forgive us if we do the same thing wrong over again?" We said what we always said, "What do you think?" Well, we went around the circle. They all agreed that God would certainly forgive you the first time, and probably the second time, but if you kept doing the same thing bad over and over again, after that, no. He'd lower the boom.

And I said to them, "If you're all right, then we've had it. Because I don't know about you, but I do the same bad things over and over again." And I told them the story of how Jesus had told his disciples to forgive not 7 times but 70 X 7 times. God is not like us. God loves us more than any human being ever could and God continues to forgive.

The psalmist says this today. "Even if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will sustain me." Our parents should love us more than any other person on earth loves us. But our parents are also human beings, and speaking as a parent, when my kids did the same things over and over again that I had told them not to do, I got annoyed with them and told them off, punished them. Of course, in the end, I did forgive them. But then the next time they did it.... I imagine you can all relate. Both to the parents and the kids.

But God is immensely patient with us. God longs to gather us all up, like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings. I love that image of God! God yearns for us. God continues to forgive us and love us, no matter what we do. Doesn't mean he'll save us from the consequences. But there is nothing! Nothing! Nothing we can do to stop God from loving us. That's hard to remember sometimes, when we feel we've been particularly bad. But it's true. God forgives us and loves us, because God is love. If you doubt this, remember that Jesus, the Son of God, forgave his enemies even while they were crucifying him.

And knowing this can make all the difference in our lives. It can give us a sense of security. Knowing that God is with us and will never abandon us, even if every other human being does, can make all the difference in our lives. It can be the secure centre we come back to. It can give us the confidence to try things, even if we're not sure we can do them. It can comfort us and reassure us when things go badly for us, or when we're afraid. It can give us the courage to offer love to others, even when we don't know if they'll accept it.

When I was about 15, I injured my knee. The doctor told me I had a neuroma and would need surgery. I remember asking him what that meant and my Mom, who was a nurse, said she'd explain it to me. Only she didn't understand it very well, so I was kind of confused and didn't know quite what was happening or how serious it was, and that made me pretty anxious when the time came to go to the hospital. I was also mad at my Mom.

Well, I had the surgery, and I think at some point I was able to speak to the doctor and he explained what he'd done, which helped some. And the operation went well. But I still had to stay in the hospital a few days. I was kind of lonely and bored in the hospital. Both my parents had jobs so they didn't come to visit much. My siblings had no way to get there. And I felt unsure of myself and anxious and I was feeling awful from the anaesthetic and I just needed some reassurance.

The next morning, I found a little card on my breakfast tray. And every other morning, too. They were those little business card size things you could get from Christian book stores with a nice picture and a quote from the Bible and on the back it said "from the chaplain's office." I don't even remember what it said - of course, that's 47 years ago, so no wonder. But I do remember getting a real lift from it. I remember feeling like suddenly I had an anchor, that I wasn't in this alone, all adrift, but God was with me. I was hoping the chaplain would come visit, but he didn't. But even so, I knew I wasn't alone. I kept those cards for years. Actually knowing me, I probably still have them somewhere.

For me, the thing that gets me through all the various troubles of life, is knowing that God is with me. That God loves me and will continue to love me, no matter what. This is my secure centre, my refuge. And this gives me the confidence to reach out to others in love. When we are secure in God's love, we feel safe in reaching out and offering that love to others. Because even if they reject us, God is still with us.

This is really what a church should be like, too. Knowing that God loves us, and nothing can change that, means we can be free to love each other, imperfect as we are, to share that love and forgiveness amongst each other. And to offer it to the wider world, whom God also loves. All the mission programs in the world boil down to this: reaching out to other people with the good news that God loves them, and showing them what that love looks like by loving them ourselves.

The Christian life is about accepting that love and forgiveness from God and returning it and letting God mould our lives to make us more like him, more like Jesus. So that we, too, may make loving people our default setting. So that we, too, can care so much for others that we reach out to them with good news, with love, with caring and comfort, even if it costs us.

I'm finding our Lenten study helpful this year. We've been talking about taking time to stop. To stop whatever we are doing and just be for a few moments. To have the time to be with God, to soak in God's love, to chat with God, to offer to God whatever it is we have in that moment, whether it's our love or our anger, our confidence or our doubts, our hopes or our fears. And just to be with God in that and accept God's loving presence within us. It's been a wonderful reminder.

This Lent, try taking some time each day to stop and contemplate God's overwhelming love for you. Let yourself really soak in it and believe in it and accept it and return it with joy and thanksgiving.