

Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Luke 13:31-35
Rev. Don J. Best
2nd Sunday in Lent
Bethel Presbyterian Church
March 17, 2019

For our gospel reading for this Second Sunday in Lent, we hear from Luke, chapter 13, verses 31 through 35. We join Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, when he encounters a group of Pharisees who, contrary to their other actions, seem to be concerned for Jesus' safety. They warn him that Herod is out to kill him. But Jesus sloughs off their warning because he has other plans. Listen to this reading from Luke chapter 13:

Gospel Reading

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

³² He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

³⁴ 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! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

I may sound like broken record, saying that the season of Lent is taking us to Jerusalem and ultimately the cross of Good Friday, but almost everything in this reading shows that this is what was on the mind of Jesus too. The way that the gospel writer has crafted this story the reader's mind, our mind, is drawn to the events that will take place in Jerusalem. Even when Jesus describes what he will be doing: "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work," brings to mind events that transpire at the end of Holy Week: Good Friday through Easter. But let's not get ahead of the story.

When the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod, the same Herod who beheaded John the Baptist, has murderous plans for him, Jesus is not concerned and seems to be taunting Herod: "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting

out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." Not only does Jesus not run and hide, or head for the hills, Jesus gives them his itinerary!

What may seem unnecessarily bold, even foolish to us, makes sense in the gospel story. Jesus, along with his disciples, are on the way to Jerusalem. Jesus has told them that he *must* go to Jerusalem where he will, "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed..." Jesus is on a mission, a mission with divine purpose. He cannot be diverted by Herod, or any other human influence. Jesus knows what waits for him in Jerusalem, and knows that nothing can happen to him, before God's plan plays out. "Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." The City of David has a reputation for ignoring, persecuting, and even killing the ones that God sends to them. But more than this reputation, Jesus has been shown what will happen to him when he arrives at the city and temple of God.

In the second part of our reading, beginning with verse 34, Jesus laments over the history and future of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" Then continuing to speak in a way that seems to communicate God's own sorrow: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Much is made about this quote from Jesus, as an example of feminine imagery for God, and God's protecting and caring nature. But the more important part of this lament is Israel's refusal to come under God's shelter and protection. Even after all the prophets God sent, and now with God's own Son proclaiming the arrival of God's kingdom, Jerusalem, the city of David, and the symbol of Israel's power in the world, refuses to listen, and come to God.

Each week, my sermon preparation includes reading several resources about the text. One of these resources is a weekly email from the editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, a publication of the PCUSA. This week the reflection was by pastor John Wurster. As I was writing this sermon, Pastor Wurster's remarks kept coming to mind. I have decided to share them with you. The following is substantially quoted from that email:

As [Jesus] laments, he says, "How often I have desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." How often I have desired. Desired. That's a strong word. I desire. This phrase is pointing us to something significant about Jesus' character, and to God's. Jesus yearns deeply to gather us. With great longing, Jesus seeks to gather us to himself, to bring us close, hold us, shelter us, keep us. It is a desire for an intimate relationship with us.

I'm not sure we very often think of God as desiring us, longing for us. We are more likely to see God as judging us or correcting us or punishing us or testing us or condemning us. Or maybe we see God as distant and disinterested. But this text shows that, in Jesus, God is close and God is desiring us, as if there is something in the very nature of God that is completed in us, something in God that is fulfilled by being in relationship with us.

God's longing is not just seen in this single verse. It is a great theme of Scripture: God seeking us out. In the story of creation in Genesis 1, humans are created in the very image of God. From the beginning, we have been marked by God in an intimate way. Perhaps it is our identity as bearers of God's own image that attracts God to us.

It is God seeking out the old man Abraham in today's lesson from Genesis 15, making a covenant against all odds and directing Abraham to consider the stars of the heavens as indications of the fruitful results of this relationship. It's the crazy shepherd leaving 99 sheep to go after one who is lost. It's the love-struck father running out of the house to welcome home his prodigal child. It's what baptism is about. It's God looking for us, claiming us, desiring us, reaching out and gathering us in.

We hide. We resist. We flee. We follow our way, embrace our own truth, live our own lives. Still God seeks us out. How often have I desired to gather you and you were not willing? Still God longs for us. Why?

Maybe God yearns to show us who we truly are, how beautifully we've been made, how deep is our capacity for goodness and blessing. Maybe God's desire is to uncover for us the love that is at the core of our being, which we tend to ignore even as we look and struggle for affirmation elsewhere. Maybe God longs for us to behold our true selves, intrinsically connected to the God whose image we bear.

One other time in the Gospel of Luke Jesus speaks of his desire for us. It is the night before his death. He sits with his disciples around a table. He says, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover meal with you" (22:15). I desire to eat with you. Later that night he will be betrayed and denied. The next day he will die. But in this moment, his desire is for connection with those at the table, sharing with them bread and wine, sharing with them abundant life.

From font to table to cross, the signs of God's desire remain ever before us - a promised presence in all things, at all times. How deep is God's longing for us. We can hide, resist or flee. We can fill our hearts with fear and anxiety. We can fill our lives with the message that we don't have enough, that we don't

do enough, that we have failed. But God's desire for us remains. We cannot deter it.

What if we could yield to it? What if we could claim the oneness with God planted deep within us - and nurture it and trust it? What if we were willing to admit our dependence and take shelter under God's wings? What if we gathered amidst font, table and cross with joy and expectation? What if in yielding to God's desire for us we awakened our own desire for God, realizing that what we've been looking for after all is the One who has been longing for us after all?

Maybe we would worship more mindfully or pray more fervently or serve more readily. Maybe we would be more faithful, more hopeful, more loving. Or maybe we would simply be more thankful.

Let us pray:

Holy God, as we hear of your desire for us, help us to turn not away from you, but toward your loving care and shelter. With his eyes set on Jerusalem, your Son was not deterred by worldly things, but remained focused on his mission. His mission to save us all and gather us under the grace of his cross and the glory of his resurrection. Mighty God, make us worthy and thankful for your grace and righteousness. Make us servants of your will in the church and in the world. AMEN.