

Second Sunday in Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
16 March 2025

Luke 13:31-35

I find myself thinking about people I have known, and others around the world who have made it their life's mission to care for the dying and the suffering. I am thinking of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, living and ministering for decades among those who were dying, the forgotten ones, the outcast, the refuse of a society with little compassion for those who don't belong to the highest castes. I find myself thinking about the many hospice doctors and nurses I have met as a Social Worker and priest. Their love, their devotion, and their compassion for those who are dying has brought humanity and comfort to many around the world. I am thinking about the thousands of missionaries working in famine-ravaged countries around the world, tending to the sick, burying the dead, comforting those who are grieving, and surrounding entire communities with Christ's love for the lost, the alone, the desperate.

In the passage today some Pharisees come to warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him, but their intentions are less than honorable. The context of the passage, what came right before in Luke, tells us that Jesus was "teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem" (v. 22.) At some point someone asks him who will be saved. Jesus answers "Many will try to enter but will not be able" (v. 24). They will find the door shut. They will knock and say, "Lord, open to us." But the Lord will reply from behind the door, "I don't know where you come from." Those outside will begin to list all the good things they have done with Jesus, but the Lord will reply again, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!" (v. 28).

Now, in our text today, the Pharisees who come and warn Jesus think that what they are doing warning Jesus is the right thing, but "does Jesus know where they come from? Does Jesus know their real motives? They in fact may be "some of the evildoers from the previous paragraph -- even though they seem to want to protect Jesus." (Stopffregen, www.crossmarks.com). Perhaps, all they want is to get rid of a dangerous revolutionary. Perhaps they are trying to avoid trouble. In either case, Jesus responds, "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. 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.'" These verses are a bit confusing. Jesus calls Herod a "fox" or a "Jackal" in some translations. By this Jesus is now saying that Herod is wise as a fox or sly as a fox. By this, Jesus is saying that Herod is not a Lion, as he claims to be. He is ultimately unable to thwart the will of God. He can't stop Jesus from fulfilling his mission. Jesus must continue his walk to Jerusalem and no one, including Herod, will be able to stop him. His destination is just three days away and no human power will prevent him from completing his journey!

The argument Jesus uses to drive his message home is a well-known argument. “It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” The great city, the center of the people’s identity and culture, the location of the beloved Temple, “The city of God” has a distinguished history of killing God’s prophets. Over and over again, God tried to protect the people of Jerusalem (and indeed all Jewish people who are represented by the city) under his wings, but over and over again, the city and its people rejected the Holy Ones of God. In a way, Jesus makes it clear that Herod, the Galilean King, is utterly unable to usurp God’s plans, which must be fulfilled in Jerusalem, a territory that is not under Herod’s control. Jerusalem used to be under the rule of Philip, Herod’s brother, but after Philip’s death Rome had appointed a governor to rule the province.

Some have used the lament of Jesus, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I wanted to gather up your little ones as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” to speak of the “maternal instincts” of Jesus. Some have even called Jesus “Our Mother”. I don’t believe that Jesus is talking about himself here, but rather he is talking about God. The image of God gathering his people under his wings is well known in Biblical Literature. In Ruth 2:12 the people of God come under God’s wings for refuge. Psalm 17:8 prays, “Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.” Psalm 37:7 exclaims, “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Just to mention a few passages. It is God, Father-Son-Holy Spirit, who wants to gather Jerusalem under his mighty wings.

God had sent his prophets to Jerusalem to bring them back into the fold, to cover them with his protection, to provide an environment for healing, and to rescue them from their oppression and their sin. Like those dying in Calcutta, Jerusalem was also dying, although their death was the slow death of sin and isolation. They felt abandoned by God and unable to be obedient to the law. They knew they were afflicted by a grave condition, but they were simply unable to stop the spread of the disease. God attempted over and over again to gather them up in closeness and love. To provide warmth and care. To forgive them and restore them to a proper relationship with him. But over and over again, Jerusalem had refused the prophets of the Lord, in pretty much the same way they will reject and kill God’s own son. Tradition has it that Isaiah, Habakuk, Zechariah and other prophets were all killed in Jerusalem. Of these, the audience of Jesus remembered most especially Zechariah, the prophet who was killed by king Johash and whose blood was spread between the steps and the altar of the temple (Matthew 23:35).

It is for this reason that Jesus says, “Your house is left to you!” Some translations capture the full meaning of the expression by saying, “Your house is left to you desolate!” I often wonder if the Jerusalem of old might not be an appropriate metaphor for us today. Our own world often feels so desolate, so alone, so hostile to God’s love and compassion. We too live in a world that often kills and oppresses the holy ones of God. We too live in a rebellious world that refuses the gospel of Christ and chooses a different gospel instead: A gospel of consumerism, a gospel of intolerance, a gospel of selfishness, and a gospel of hatred. Many of us don’t believe we need a savior.

There is a beautiful Anglican Collect that says, “You stretched out your arms of love on the hardwood of the cross that all of us may come within the reach of your saving embrace...” Imagine an eagle with outstretched wings, covering her little ones with her protection and her care. I often think of Christ’s outstretched arms on the cross as God’s own wings, seeking to gather us from all the ends of the world into one family. His cross is the ultimate sacrifice for the world. There is love and solidarity under those wings. There is healing and restoration under God’s mighty wings. The Messiah's arms are long enough to surround our world. He is the solution to our despair, our aimless wonderings, our restless hearts, and our lack of meaning and purpose.

Today, Christ reminds us that we are as defenseless as Jerusalem, and we can’t get to where we are going without God on our side. We are utterly hopeless to defend ourselves from our enemy, to find the way home, and to obtain the salvation God wants for us to have. We need Christ in our lives, and nothing will thwart God’s plans for this beautiful earth. Nothing will stand in God’s way. He is in control of history, and he has a plan and a destination for our journey.

During this second Sunday of Lent, I invite all of you to come within the reach of his saving embrace, but I pray you don’t come alone. I pray you will go deep into Jerusalem, deep into Calcutta, deep into Houston, and find those who for whatever reason find themselves outside of that embrace. There are so many of our brothers and sisters who are alone, isolated, and forgotten. It is up to you and I to point them to the one dying for them on a cross. It is our duty to share his love and his compassion for them. I pray that today you will hear this command to make his name known to the ends of the earth because only in him can we live in safety and find refuge and restoration. Only in him can we find real life. Amen!