

“Oh Jerusalem”

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18, Luke 13: 31-35

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Lent is a season for self reflection and deep soul searching. When you accept the invitation to journey with Jesus through these forty days, you will undoubtedly find yourself taking a long hard look at some painful or uncomfortable things. Presumably, such a discipline of critical self reflection makes you a stronger disciple. Jesus warns us not to make a show of our praying or our fasting or any of the other disciplines we engage in during Lent. He tells us to do these things humbly, in secret, not to draw attention or to seek acknowledgement for what we do.

As part of this Lenten discipline, Jesus invites us to examine the motivations for our actions and to live by his example. In the story we hear today, Jesus teaches us the value of respectful confrontation. He will not allow anyone, even the Pharisees, to sidetrack him from completing his mission, no matter how dangerous it may become. The Pharisees tell Jesus that Herod is out to kill him, yet Jesus does not back down. He says, “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.’” Nothing can keep Jesus from fulfilling his mission, not threat of death or death itself.

Jesus knows the fate that awaits him and he is unafraid. He also knows the fate of Jerusalem and is sad about what will happen. He is more than just sad. Jesus openly grieves for the city and the people he loves so dearly. Jerusalem has a violent and shameful history of silencing those who speak an unwanted truth. Things have not changed so dramatically in the two thousand years since Jesus first spoke these words. Prophets of old were rejected in their hometowns. Prophets today receive much the same treatment. People have a hard time hearing the ugly truth about them. It is not easy to face one’s misdeeds and to honestly change that behavior.

This is only the second Sunday in Lent. You are free to hear this story and do nothing or you may receive it as a wake up call. There are many ways that we unwittingly contribute to systems and practices that perpetuate injustice throughout the world. We see the world falling apart and try to make simple changes that we hope will stave off the devastation. We argue whether or not global warming is real and nevertheless, decide to turn down the heat. We argue that too many people enter our country illegally, and regardless support ministries that meet their needs when they arrive in our communities.

Jesus responds to the injustices he faces in a much more challenging way. He unashamedly stands up to the political and religious powers of his day and tells them he will not go away. They can not frighten him because he is fearless in the face of any of their threats. They can not deter him because he knows God is the only authority to whom he will answer. He vows instead to open the eyes of the lowly and give them a sense of empowerment. He openly grieves for the people of his day that stone the truth tellers. Jesus was a threat not because he healed or fed people. He was a threat because

in doing these things he showed people that they were valuable, they had power, they had a voice and he encouraged them to speak the truth as he had done. Jesus was a threat because he challenged the power structure of his day and without making threats of violence, knew that the truth he spoke had the power to unravel everything they held so dearly.

In Brian McLaren's book, *Everything Must Change* he identifies what he calls a suicide machine. He believes we are addicted to three systems that put us on a collision course toward disaster. They are the prosperity, security and equity systems. Capitalism is at the heart of the prosperity system. In order to maintain a healthy prosperity system one must spend, acquire, accumulate debt and make choices that may not take into consideration our interconnectedness with peoples trapped by this system of mass production and consumption. We maintain the security system by creating more powerful bombs to keep us "safe" from our enemies or by denying our enemies the access to the weapons that would protect them from us. The equity system presumes there will always be haves and have nots. This is the way of the world and there is little we can do to change this. We convince ourselves that no decisions we make can change the situation of global poverty. We know this is not true. We clothe ourselves in these and many other untruths trying to maintain our prosperity and security systems and deny equity to others.

Jesus calls us to take some time to examine our place in the complex global arena. We can not only examine, but pray for wisdom to make meaningful changes that will help dismantle these systems. Jesus openly challenged the systems of his day. He teaches us not to store up our treasures on earth, but in heaven. He reminds us that we have more than enough to live an abundant life. We pray "give us this day our daily bread" and then worry that the cupboard will run bare. We can not keep ourselves safe by building more sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, but rather by creating communities of equity and justice where bombs and war and violence are no longer necessary. We can initiate an insurgency of love and peace then watch that movement take over the world.

We so easily listen to the voice of the culture and reject the prophetic calling of Jesus. Has the Church lost its prophetic edge? Are we afraid to speak the truth? The message of the church must be a countercultural message. An adapted poem, originally by S. Rickly Christian describes the kind of prophecy that the world needs right now.

"The world needs men and women who cannot be bought; whose word is their bond; who put character above wealth; who possess opinions and a will; who are larger than their vocations; who do not hesitate to take chances. The world needs men and women who will not lose their individuality in a crowd; who will be as honest in small things as in great things; who will make no compromise with wrong; whose ambitions are not confined to their own selfish desires. The world needs men and women who will not say they do it because everybody else does it; who are true to their friends through good report and evil report, in adversity as well as in prosperity; who do not believe that shrewdness, cunning, and hard-headedness are the best qualities for winning; who are not ashamed or afraid to stand for the truth when it is unpopular. The world needs young men

and women who say no with emphasis, though all the rest of the world says yes and yes with boldness, though all the rest of the world says no.

(Beth Quick, "Oh Jerusalem," Sermon for Lent 2/C, March 11, 2001.)

Jesus not only calls us to unapologetically reclaim our prophetic voice, but models a new way of being. Through the image of a mother hen calling to herself and protecting her chicks, he provides a startling imagery of sacrificial love. He offers himself for our protection. He stands up to those in power on our behalf. Jesus looks back as he approaches his death and is sad. He is sad that his followers have not been able to understand his message. He is sad that they listen too easily to others and so little to what he says. He is sad that they are so quickly frightened when political leaders flex their muscles and threaten him with violence. Some day they will understand better. For now, he accepts the role of hope-filled prophet and loving protector. As any mother can understand, Jesus becomes the one who stands against the violence and is willing to die if it will bring life to his people.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "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 position in the world—wings spread, breast exposed—but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand." Perhaps it is curious that Jesus chooses the image of a hen. Why not an eagle or a leopard or a lion? Compared to such animals, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. But a hen is what he chooses, which if you think about it, says Taylor, is pretty typical of him. "Of course he chooses the chicken, which is as far from the fox as you can get. That way, the options become very clear; you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks."

She says, "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 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." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "As the Hen Gathers Her Brood," *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1986, p. 201)

This is how we stand. When danger awaits and temptation seems too much for you to resist, how will you respond? Will you be the one to protect the vulnerable, to speak a truth that will dismantle the stronghold of the unjust or will you keep silent or scatter? Jesus shows us the way. He will give us the courage, wisdom and compassion to do what is necessary even in the face of danger. We need only believe it is so. Amen