

Lent 2, Year C
Luke 13:31-35
March 17, 2019
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This morning Luke invites us into a contemplation by Jesus on his relationship with his own people. At the heart of that contemplation is a lament about opportunities lost, about a people who were not able to see that the very life with God they most longed for was right in front of them. “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.” I don’t know if this lament is historical; I can’t find that exact quote in the tradition, which argues obliquely that it may well be, though there is plenty of biblical material demonstrating the truth of it. Whether historical or not, it is a profound statement. This morning I want to talk about Jerusalem, but I want to talk about it as a type, a symbol of something much larger.

At the very heart of Judaism was the notion of being chosen by God for a special purpose. We might call it “Jewish Exceptionalism,” a term I am going to use without irony. They saw their purpose as being chosen by God to reveal that their God, the God of the Jews, was in truth the God of the entire universe, and as well they were to reveal to the world that this God worked through a deep love and compassion for the whole earth and all the people who dwelt on it. At almost no point in their history were the Jews attempting to convert the world to Judaism, that was not their job. Their job was to model justice, to model compassion, to model care not just for themselves but for everyone so that the world might see the glory and the presence of God. They knew perfectly well they didn’t do this perfectly, but they knew also they

were called to persist. And yet, institutional Judaism consistently rejected the prophetic voices that critiqued Judaism. And certainly institutional Judaism rejected Jesus. I must add that the Jews did not kill Jesus, that is a lie - I don't know what else to call it - Christians told in later generations, when Christianity emerged upon the world scene as a separate religion. The Romans killed Jesus on the authority of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, using a Roman method of execution. Though some Jews were doubtless pleased, they did not, because they could not, have had any influence for good or ill on that hastily taken decision.

They did not reject Jesus because he came telling them that they should "smile on each other, everybody get together try to love one another right now." Nobody gets rejected, and certainly nobody gets killed for saying things like that. Jesus was rejected because he had the temerity to spell out the implications of the universal compassion and mercy that characterized God as Jesus seems to have proclaimed him. He drew from their common tradition stories about God acting mercifully toward those institutional Judaism had marginalized and even rejected altogether, and he made up other stories illustrating the same point. He even got violent, yes, Jesus meek and mild seems to have gotten violent, in the Temple square as he witnessed people brokering access to God by trading the unclean money with Cesar's image on it for the Temple money people used to buy whatever they going to have sacrificed on the high holy days. This was not only a perfectly legal trading system, it was an absolutely essential part of the whole sacrificial system, and for Jesus to attack it physically demonstrated to those in charge that he was either unhinged, or a terrible traitor to his own native faith, or both. He was rejected, in other words, at least in part because he interpreted the sacred history of his own people in a manner that was entirely different from anything they could understand. These people knew how

God worked, and they had centuries of practice to prove it, and no one who came with a different vision, and a different practice could possibly be of God. Jerusalem rejected Jesus for the same reason they rejected the prophets, until they canonized them of course. They rejected him because he used the Jewish tradition to critique the Jewish present, and so exposed the faithlessness of the people.

My friends, I hope that sounds familiar, because if it doesn't, it should. We too are an exceptional people - and again I say that without irony - in the history of the world. We are the first people to attempt to govern ourselves through a representative democracy, not an authoritarian system. We are a people who have stated in our founding documents that "All men are created equal," and we have a statue in New York harbor - a gift from France - which looks across the ocean to Europe bidding the old world to send us their tired, their poor, "their huddled masses yearning to breath free." That is as wonderful as it is remarkable, and again, when we started on this great experiment "four score and seven years" before the battle of Gettysburg, we were alone in the world in even attempting it.

Yet we know as well that every single person in the history of this country who has come along and interpreted our common history and our shared foundational documents in a manner that exposes the contradictions between our practice and our ideals has been at first rejected, and many times killed, until of course they were canonized. We know that the costliest war in American history - despite highly successful attempts to distract us from the truth - was fought over whether or not a white man should continue to be able to own a black person, and we know as well that under Roger Taney the US Supreme court had just four years before the outbreak of

that war, ruled that yes indeed, a white man may well own a black person. It is a constitutional right.

Further, if you believe the Trump administration is the first one in our history to dehumanize people, then you simply don't know our history. It would be remarkably difficult - I believe impossible - to find a time in our entire history when this country, this wonderful, truly exceptional country, this great nation whose ideals are as inspiring as any the world has ever seen, has not in one way or another dehumanized people, some of whom were its own citizens - here I think not just of immigrants and black people, but women as well - and some of whom lived in places far away. And if you think conservatives are the only ones who specialize in dehumanizing others, then don't think about who ran the Viet Nam war, or who today wants to limit free speech on college campuses, or which of several administrations passed crime bills that effectively insured urban black people would be treated far worse than suburban white people. Your hint is that a recent one took office in January of 1993. Our history is clear, dehumanization is no respecter of political viewpoints, we have all betrayed our own tradition. "Oh D.C., D.C. the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it."

The lesson is obvious, when there is a system in place that benefits those who run it, it is immensely difficult for those in charge to listen to a critique of that system, and to hear from anyone whatsoever that the system as it is being used betrays the very values on which that system was founded. That is hard, too hard for most of us, and all of us have a strong tendency to want to reject, those who offer such a critique. I don't care whether that system is as small as the one people use to run their immediate families, their small business, their multi-national companies, or great nations such as ours, no one wants to hear they have betrayed the very

values that lie at the heart of the system they are running. Just listen again to the testimony Mark Zuckerberg offered to Congress. Sheesh.

Jerusalem is a great and historic city, the heart and soul of Judaism both then and now. Jerusalem in the larger and more important sense, the sense I am speaking of it today, is every people who become self conscious enough to create a vision for themselves as a nation separate and apart from all others, and who seek to incarnate that vision in the world. Jerusalem, as I believe, is also every single one of us who in the struggle to live out our own private vision in our own private lives bends that vision from time to time to suit our own private needs, and so betrays that vision, often without ever realizing it.

This text is for all of us, and I don't just mean all of us in the USA, but all of us everywhere. It reminds us all that God critiques us - judges is the old fashion word - not as a justification for condemning us, but in order that we might know the truth, and see ourselves whole. Today's text reminds us that at least some of the time we reject the very values we most claim to honor, and the very God we most claim to love. This text, this lament, is thus a vital part of the drama of our own salvation, for it also assures us that the God who judges does so as one who loves completely and unreservedly, and longs to gather us together as a "hen gathers her brood under her wings." That, it seems to me, is remarkably good news.