

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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2nd Sunday in Lent
Luke 13:31-35

Love's Lament

I've never heard of a survey asking people their feelings about the seasons of the church year, but I'd like to bet that "Lent" would not make the list of favorites. Lent feels somber, reflective, and maybe even guilt-producing. We prefer happy, uplifting, and feel-good. Lent is like a visit to the dentist-- it feels good when it's over.

But this year I am more convinced than ever that we need Lent. Because at its heart, Lent is a season which teaches us values by which to live our lives, Christ's values such as honesty and humility, courage and compassion. These values will help us feel good when our life is over.

The recent scandal over college admission cheating reveals what we already knew, that the anxious lust for status, privilege, and money is strong in our culture. Lying, cheating, stealing—these are behaviors we've come to expect of politicians, entertainers, and the uber-wealthy. The cynics among us mock Christian values, asking, where will those get you in today's world?

Lent stands in stark contrast, for it teaches us to be honest and humble, courageous and compassionate, before God and in the world. We focus on Jesus as he walks toward his destiny. We stand before God's judgment seat, awaiting God's verdict. And we renew our allegiance to Christ's way.

Jesus knew he was on his way to suffering and death. The conversation reported in today's gospel reveals his courage in the face of threats, and his compassion even for those who threatened him.

Maybe it was a surprise that some Pharisees were warning him about Herod, since many of the Pharisees were opposed to Jesus and his movement. But Herod's antipathy was no surprise. This is not the same Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby, from whom his family fled to Egypt. This is his son, Herod Antipas. In the annals of history, both Herods were big fishes in small ponds, but the son's pond was even smaller than that of his father since the first Herod's kingdom was divided among three sons. And all of them, father and sons, held power only if they gave allegiance to the Roman Emperor.

Even so, for Jesus to dismiss Herod and call him a "fox" was politically risky. This Herod, after all, was the one who imprisoned John the Baptist and then had him beheaded. He was a small-time despot, but a despot nonetheless. Jesus scoffs at his bully tactics—"Go ahead, hit me right here, see if I care"—because the truth is that Herod has earthly power only, and Jesus is on God's mission. He won't bow before a pretender. He knows that evil will not ultimately prevail.

Which leads to a meditation on the evil which has captured the hearts of the people, lured them away from God, and is keeping them from God's loving shelter. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus cries, lamenting past history, present reality, and future events. In the Bible, "Jerusalem" is often a symbol. In the Hebrew tradition, it is the city of the LORD, the place from which God's good rule over earth emanates. In New Testament thought, "the new Jerusalem" is God's holy city, the vision of all things made new where God dwells with mortals. But for Jesus at this particular moment, Jerusalem is a symbol of the failure of God's people to heed God's word. It's enough to make him weep, knowing that he will be the next in a long line of God's prophets to be rejected.

And so he laments. Now, lamentation has a long history in Hebrew culture. Just read the Psalms. More than 1/3 of the Psalms are laments, either the lament of an individual or of the whole community. Or read the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah's outpouring of grief at the destruction of Jerusalem. Search the prophets, and you'll find their laments. Laments are honest expressions of loss or disappointment, anger or grief. Jesus knew how to be honest before God, to lay it out there. A lament is more than a complaint, because it is offered to God in faith that God can do something about the injustice suffered. It is also more than a cry of sadness, because its faith is that sadness can be healed by God's grace. The difference is that a lament is given to God, who can take it, and transform it, and who is likely to expect that the one lamenting will change in the process.

So Jesus weeps, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," because he loves God's people, because he knows what lies ahead for him and for Jerusalem's people, because he is a Jew and Jews know how to lament. He cries, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," because he knows God's deep, deep love, like the love of a hen for her chicks who have run the wrong way under the threats of a fox's sharp teeth. He laments, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" because he is not at all politically naïve, and he is willing to step up and speak the truth and take the consequences the world will mete out. The city will scorn him and mock him, and outside its walls he will be hung on a cross to die.

There is so much in this for us today. Jesus shows us that his way means speaking truth to power, whatever the cost. He could have chosen a different way. He could have accepted the warnings of the Pharisees quietly, found "off the beaten track" places to teach and heal, and lowered his profile. Instead, he sent a message back to Herod, openly defied his threat, and headed to the capital city to complete his mission. If our image of Jesus is that he was meek and mild, non-confrontational, and non-political, then this episode challenges that picture. God's calling required moral courage of Jesus. God's calling requires moral courage of us. Maybe that means defending someone from a bully at school, or a bully in the office. Maybe that means not looking the other way when you know that someone is cheating. Maybe that means speaking up for those whose voices have been stifled. Living God's love in the world does not mean living like a doormat, it means using the power of truth to stand for God's justice and righteousness. Like Jesus.

Episcopal priest and writer Robert C. Morris describes overcoming his fears to answer God's call to enter into interracial dialogue in his community. He says,

"God had given me a heart for racial justice during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. . . . But I still had to face the 'nay-sayers' in my soul. They were chattering away. . . . but my wrestling in the 'battlefield of the soul' was not so much to *summon* courage as to *remove the hindrances* to its following."

Morris observes,

"The wellsprings of courage are built into our nature. . . . Though inner voices may say 'run and hide,' and the signs of the times may urge us to lose heart, the God-rooted power at the center of our nature may give us courage." ("The Heart is Always Beating," *Weavings* vol. xxvii, no. 4, pp. 32-35)

Courage also includes the willingness to be vulnerable. Picture that mother hen defending her chicks against a marauding fox. Wings are flapping, feathers are flying, cheeping chicks are running in all directions—after all, the fox is bigger and toothier and maybe even smarter than the hen. But she has

the courage of a mother, she is outraged, and she will give her own life if need be to protect the lives of her young ones.

Like Jesus. Whose vulnerability will soon be complete, as he submits to his destiny. But at this moment in time, his vulnerability is exposed in his lament, as he grieves the resistance of God's children to God's love. Today we grieve with the people of New Zealand, and with Muslims around the world whose sacred space has been invaded by violence. We are outraged that houses of worship, places where people gather to pray and draw closer to God, have been attacked. We join our prayers of lament with all people of faith, and in doing so, we join ourselves with the human family and allow our hearts to be broken by the suffering of others. At the door of the mosque, the shooter was greeted with kind words: "Hello, brother." The greeter had to have seen the guns—was he trying to defuse a potentially angry situation? Or was he simply meeting hate with something higher, more noble and true to his faith?

In the Muslim tradition, Jesus, peace be upon him, is one of the most highly revered prophets. Through the lens of Christian faith, I see Jesus in the welcome offered by the mosque greeter. His words reveal both courage and love. "Hello, brother."

And Jesus said of Jerusalem, of those who rejected him despite his love, "How often I have desired to gather your children together!" That is still his impulse toward us today, still his desire and longing. No matter how far we stray, no matter how fiercely we push him out of our lives, this is still God's purpose—to bring us back together and reconcile the world, in love. For Christ is love in flesh, love in a sinful world, love for sinners, love for the world.

Dear ones, beloved of God, Christ teaches us honesty and humility, courage and compassion as patterns of living which point us to God's love. In this Lenten season, may that love encompass you.

May Christ be before you, beside you, above you, beneath you, around you and inside you, ruler of your heart.

May God's power guide you, God's might uphold you, God's wisdom teach you, and God's way lie clearly before you.

May the Holy Spirit guide you each day in the way of peace.

And may your life, and our life together, witness to the one God who saves us from ourselves.