

JERUSALEM

TEXT: Luke 13:31-35

What do you think of when you picture Jerusalem? Do you picture a fortress-like city surrounded by a high wall? Perhaps you envision veiled women dodging donkeys as they wander the narrow alleyways looking for just the right food to purchase for their family dinner. Or you might see a modern city with tall buildings, the glint of the Dome of the Rock in the distance, and still some of the old walled city on the edge of town. And it just might be that you envision Jesus on one of his visits to the “Old City”, stopping to tend to someone by the side of the road in the throes of illness or pain, or angrily toppling tables in the temple, trading jibes with the Pharisees, or riding a borrowed donkey through the streets as the people waved palms.

But I wonder how often we picture Jesus as Luke describes him in today’s reading. Jesus was heading toward Jerusalem and he knew what awaited him there. Sorrow welled up in him and he whispered the words, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.” Then Luke goes on to use some of my favorite words from Jesus: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..”

This is the picture of Jesus as the one who would give his life to protect those he loved. In his agrarian upbringing he knew that at the first sign of danger a mother hen would utter a special clucking sound that called her chicks to gather under her wings for protection. She would sacrifice her life for her chicks, as Jesus would soon do.

In today’s reading Jesus is nearing Jerusalem, on his journey to Golgotha, and he has no intention of halting his travels because of a threat by the governing powers, a threat of violence, a threat that has been channeled into action in the past. He emphasizes his words by assuring his listeners that the work he is doing will be done today, and then the next day, and the day after that. It is the work of redemption in the crucifixion and the resurrection.

So Jesus continues his journey toward Jerusalem. His lament over his beloved city this early in the game is a tip off that it is not going to end well. How could it? Just think where Jesus is going: To Jerusalem, a city that stands for Israel as a whole, a city that exists under the judgment of God. Jerusalem is a city that “kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it”. How could it be anything other than the end of the road for Jesus’ earthly life?

How could it end well? Just think who Jesus is. He is a prophet like Elisha and Elijah. He is a prophet like Moses and given a similar cat herding task – to reunite the scattered people – a frequent theme in the Old Testament and one reflected in Luke. Moses is described as the prophet who suffered for the sins of the people and stepped into the breach between them and God

How could the journey of a prophet to Jerusalem end well? Maybe if the prophet realized the danger, was overcome by the prospect of discomfort, and turned back. But Jesus was a determined sort. “I must be on my way”, he said. There was a sense of determination and inevitability in Jesus’ view of his journey toward Jerusalem.

Nobody likes discomfort along the journey of life. That’s why we coin little sayings to help us along the way like, “I can stand anything as long as I can whine about it”, or “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”. But neither of these sayings fits Jesus’ situation here. He has signed on willingly for a journey whose path he knows will be littered with resistance, rejection, and likely death. He is not whining. He is lamenting. The context is an intense conflict of wills: the intention of Jesus’ adversaries, the determination of Jesus, the unwillingness of Jerusalem, and the determination of God to fulfill the divine will. Who signs on for that kind of drama?

Jerusalem is a site of great evil, but also of great things. Jerusalem is where human sinfulness and divine intervention meet. Our sinfulness meets a crucified prophet. Jerusalem is the end, but it is also the beginning of something else – the Church.

I am in awe of Jesus' faith and determination as he laments, and yet – in the context of loving determination – he presses on. He presses on believing that, in this intense clash of wills, God's will prevails, believing that in the city of death, life awaits him, that in the midst of pain, there is glory.

So, let's talk about Jerusalem, a city in the Middle East. It's on a plateau in the Judaeen Mountains between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. It is one of the oldest cities in the world, and is considered holy to the three major Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

There are several facets to the city today. It is divided into four quarters: Armenian, Christian, Jewish and Muslim. It is also divided between the "Old City" and the modern seat of Israel's government, the Knesset. It is considered by the Israelis as their capital, yet the Palestinians claim it as well, in particular East Jerusalem, where they believe they will someday return and become a nation again, with East Jerusalem as their capital city.

When the British Mandate for Palestine was expiring, the 1947 UN Partition Plan recommended "the creation of a special international regime in the City of Jerusalem, constituting it as a *corpus separatum* under the administration of the UN. Incidentally, this also included the city of Bethlehem, some 6-1/2 miles to the south. Ever since the 1948 birth of the State of Israel, world countries have acknowledged the international status of Jerusalem and have placed their embassies and diplomats in the larger coastal city of Tel Aviv, 37 miles to the west. A new American Embassy was opened on the Mediterranean coast in Tel Aviv in 1959, during the time I served there. Last year our diplomatic mission was combined with our Consulate General in Jerusalem, making us one of the only countries to move away from the UN declaration of Jerusalem as belonging to the world.

Jesus' lament over his beloved city still echoes today. The battle for this place, so sacred to so many, continues with little hope of resolution. It is right, even inevitable,

when dealing with today's reading, to ask about the present. Who or what is the "Jerusalem" of the day in which we live? Is it the political and civic sphere? Is it the religious sphere? Or is it both? Jerusalem was a center of both political and religious power and activity in the days of Jesus, but it refused to listen to its prophets, of which Jesus certainly was one. Even today this beautiful city is a center of both political and religious power.

In the Revelation of John, we receive the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. A New Jerusalem where God will dwell with God's people. The New Jerusalem is the place where God lives among us. A place where God's presence is so felt that tears of shame and pain and anger and grief are no longer shed. A place where violence and destruction are no longer realities. A place where the groans of creation are not just silenced, but no longer even exist. A place where all that separates us from God is no more.

In Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, this new heaven and new earth, for which Jesus shed tears, are now. This New Jerusalem is now our home town. In his book *Skinny Legs and All*, Tom Robbins reminds us that Jerusalem, the Middle East, is known as the Fertile Crescent. He likens this fertile crescent to the womb out of which humanity is born. He writes, "Of all the places on the planet, it is the most feverish, hot, pain-racked, tense, dilated, bloody, traumatized, stretched to the point of ripping. Remind you of something?" Yes, birthing is messy. It is bloody and painful. But in labor new life is born.

I would in no way glorify or justify the pain and violence that the Middle East or any of our world endures. But, I would say that this "stretched to the point of ripping" Jerusalem, is the Jerusalem of which we are all citizens. This is the Jerusalem which is now our home town.

And yet, it is this Jerusalem, this earth, in which God also lives among us, giving birth to new life even in the midst of gruesome violence and death. In this season of

Lent, we set our feet on the path that Jesus took to Jerusalem. We walk with him through resistance and discomfort. We will find that with Jesus as our companion, the path leads to the joy of service and a love that is stronger than death. In the New Jerusalem there will be no laments, God will come down to live with God's people, and war and strife will be no more. We must pray for this Jerusalem to come. Amen.