

REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL
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Jesus' Sorrow for Jerusalem **LUKE 13:31-35**

³¹ *At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."*³² *He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'*³³ *In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!*³⁴ *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁵ Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'*^[a]

Today's text is about Jesus—after the transfiguration when we again heard the voice say, "*this is my beloved son, listen to him;*" after the time of the temptation in the desert when he was tempted to be something other than the "*beloved son*" of his father; THE TIME WHEN he was on the way to Jerusalem to demonstrate that he was indeed the son of God as affirmed by the centurions and others after his crucifixion in the middle of an earthquake when they said, of Him, "*surely this was the son of God.*"

All the time along the way on this journey from temptation to crucifixion he has been inviting people to repent from an old way of living to new life. This message has been a part of what the Church has been telling people all along.

Christians are given the power by God to be honest about our sin, to confess all the ways that our lives have betrayed the love of God. And then, we are given the gift of forgiveness, the ability to start over, to begin life fresh and new in fellowship with God. The good news is, we can repent. We can change.

Lent is a wonderful time for us to be honest with ourselves and with God. It's a time of honesty and confession, repentance and turning around. For the Second Sunday of Lent, we have two episodes that at first don't seem to be closely related: First, A warning against Herod and his wives (Luke 13:31-33) and Second a lament over Jerusalem (13:34-35). Luke has placed these two episodes within that portion of Luke's Gospel that is often called the Travel Narrative, that long, eventful, perilous journey from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Along the way, there is constant controversy and trouble as Jesus's critics dog his every step. Just about every time he opens his mouth, there is controversy and criticism. In this Sunday's gospel, it appears that Jesus has had enough of the carping criticism and fights back with some scathing criticism of his own along with some tears of sadness.

The first section of this week's gospel is not found in the other gospels; this is Luke's special contribution to the narrative of Jesus. The second episode has an almost identical parallel in Matthew 23:37-39.

Some Pharisees, one of the two groups that seems to give Jesus the most trouble, come to Jesus and tell them that he had better get out of the region because King Herod wants to kill him. Jesus replies that they ought to go and tell Herod that he is busy doing messianic work—throwing out demons, healing the sick, and that on the "*third day*" his work will be completed.

Jesus is very aware of time and what he needs to accomplish before it is too late. Notice how he

responds to the Pharisees who warn him about Herod. *“At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “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.’”*

The last statement was a little sarcasm thrown in by Jesus because he knew that Jerusalem was the place of worship for Jewish people, the temple of God, and it seemed that the religious folk were the only ones who kept killing the messengers that God sent to them and he knew they would be the ones who would kill him. He lamented over the city of the so called *“faithful.”*

Yet, Jesus now moves steadily toward the capital city, toward Jerusalem, toward his fate on the cross. And as he does, without a thought for his own fate, he takes a moment to warn us about our fate. He takes a moment to call on us to repent.

There was a day when the church seemed preoccupied with this message that we are sinners in need of repentance. There was a day when, if you asked someone, *“What do they do at church?”* they would respond, *“Church is where you go to be told that you are a sinner and that you need to get down on your knees and repent.”*

We don't hear that message too often in churches today. Today, we are usually told that we are basically good people who are doing the best that we can, and the best that we can is good enough for God. God loves us, just as we are, warts and all. *Talk of sin is depressing, a put-down.*

But this was not the message of Jesus. He was on his way to Jerusalem, where we will find that our sin is serious, so serious that we shall conspire to put the Son of God to death on a horrible cross. And he was put there, not for the things that we usually call ugly and evil, but for the things that we call good. He was nailed to a cross by religious people, all of whom thought that they were following scripture, doing the will of God. In this, the cross stands as a stark warning of the perils of our sin. What they thought was the will of God was what they wanted the will of God to be. And that is still the case of religious folk in many places today.

Yet, by the grace of God, the cross stands for us as a sign that God forgives, that Christ takes our sin on himself, bears it, willingly endures it, and forgives it. Among his last words from the cross, words that we'll repeat here in a few weeks will be words spoken to a somewhat repentant, not fully understanding thief who hung next to him on a cross. Then, looking down from his cross, Jesus says to the murderous crowd below him, *“Father, forgive.”*

Therein is our hope, our only hope in our sin. Jesus moves on to Jerusalem, not to punish but to call to repentance. He promises a people who have a long history of turning against the prophets, of ignoring the truth, a promise of forgiveness and new life.

I think that one of the most detrimental, evil notions among us is the simple conviction, “*People don't change.*”

This, so far as I can tell, is one of the main reasons why people stay trapped in the hell of addiction. Once a drunk, always a drunk. You can't fight genetics. We arrive here in this world fixed at birth, finished. All of life consists of simply replaying the tapes that were implanted in your brain when you were born. What you call your life isn't really yours, it's a bundle of determinisms and hard wiring that you can't do anything about. Once your gender, socioeconomic level, or race has spoken, what can anybody do?

In the face of this sort of grim *“trappedness,”* even as he moves toward his certain death, Jesus calls on people to change. He calls on Jerusalem to repent. One might have thought after all of the teachings, after the centuries of prophetic warnings, it would be too late. But it's not too late. There is still time to repent.

And for us as well. Jesus may have more faith in us than we have in ourselves. I know, I know. Old habits die hard. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. Once a drunk, always a drunk. I know.

But here's what we don't know unless we are told by the gospel. In Jesus, there is a power unleashed in life, a power greater than that of our own devising. When God created us, Genesis says that God's image was stamped upon us. Admittedly, we have defaced that image terribly with our sin. Yet God intends to have God's way with us. By the grace of God, we can change.

That's a message behind today's gospel message: Not only must we change but because of the God we've got (or the God who has us) we can change.

Say what you will about the church being too judgmental, but you must admit that sometimes truth-telling can be an act of deepest faith. Is Jesus Christ, the One who not only tells the truth about our sin but also in the same breath forgives our sin? Is Jesus Christ capable of producing a new people, a reformed humanity, a new people called church, or not?

We won't know if we avoid telling the truth, speaking the truth, and daring to be people who can listen to the truth, told to us by Jesus, without resenting him for it!

Take a Lenten moment of self-reflection and think about your life as it has been and is. How have you wandered far from God's way? Have you failed to live up to your intentions? Who hasn't? Paul says we have all sinned and fallen short of the grace of God (Romans 3:23). ALL. What are those habits, those inclinations, those propensities that need to be changed so you can live a more abundant life?

The good news is, Jesus means to have us, to have all of us, as you are, warts and all, and AS HE MEANS US TO BE. The good news is you can change.

As Jesus pauses on his trek toward his cross, he weeps over the state of his beloved people, and well he may weep for us. But as he condemns us for our sin and failure to live as we have been created to live, as he states upfront our need to change, to repent, please don't miss the good news of Christ that is more powerful than any of our bad news: By the grace of God, we can repent. We can change.

In this week's gospel, Jesus weeps, weeping for unrepentant Jerusalem. He had offered an opportunity for the people to turn, and return to the Lord but, up to this point, they had refused repentance. Now he weeps.

One person in seminary with us told that back when he served as Junior High rep to the Official Board of Buncombe Street Methodist Church, Billy Graham announced a city-wide crusade in their town, little Greenville, South Carolina. The whole town mobilized. Every church in town was canvassed for their support. At the church's board meeting, grownups debated his congregation's participation. Their preacher told the board what a great opportunity this was for our church, for our whole town. Billy Graham! Our preacher said that he had been meeting for the last few months with a group of clergy from other churches in town and rarely had he witnessed such excitement.

The board was having none of it and refused to rejoice with our pastor at the prospect of the citywide crusade.

"Bunch of Baptists trying to get a leg up on us," gasped one.

"Graham says that there will be no separation of the races during the meetings." That did it. The board voted to protect our church from Graham's racial mixing and refused participation.

After the meeting, the young Junior High boy said, *"as I exited a side door to catch the legally racially segregated Greenville bus to go home, down a dark church hallway I heard weeping. I crept down the hall. Light shown from an open door. I peeked in. Our pastor, Dr. Dubose, was sobbing, holding his head in his hands."*

You see, my friends, keeping up with the disruptive movements of a righteous God is not for the faint of heart.

The young pastor in training said, "I thank God that at an early age, I got to see what makes preachers cry."

You can see the pain in the face of a little boy who simply idolizes his dad. For weeks, his dad has promised that come the weekend, he would take him to the ball park and teach him to hit a baseball, but just as the weekend before the little boy stands alone by the window waiting with his bat and glove. On his face a single tear falls down as he says to his mother, *"Why doesn't he want to be with me?"* The pain of rejected love; it's an awful pain.

And you can see this pain, perhaps clearest in the face of a loving God whose creation has turned away. He created mankind, sought their affection, purchased their redemption, but in return they have constantly rejected Him. They jeer Him; mock His holy name, some claiming He doesn't even exist. Oh, the pain of rejected love.

And the greater the love, the greater the pain of the rejection. The bible says that greater love has no man than this, that he would lay down his life for a friend. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. God demonstrates His love this way, while we were yet still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. The love that God has for His creation is unfathomable, and greater than any love we could imagine. So, with such great love as this, imagine the pain within the heart of God when His people refuse Him.

And we get a glimpse into that pain when we read, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"*

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they didn't search out God, God searched for them. Jacob didn't go into the desert looking for a wrestling match with God, but God pursued Jacob, wrestled all night with Him and changed his name to Israel. And when Israel's descendants would wander away, God would pursue them.

Prophet after prophet was sent. And each had the same message, "turn your hearts back to God because He loves you and wants you to be with Him." But with each prophet came the rejection. And the rejection wasn't just of the messenger, but of the One who sent the messenger. And the more God spoke, the more man turned a deaf ear. The more God showed His love, the more that love was rejected. And this love prompted God to do the unthinkable. When they wouldn't listen to the prophets, perhaps they would listen to God Himself.

It was this love which wrapped itself in human flesh. It was this love which walked the hard trails of Galilee and spoke to the hard hearts of the religious. It was this love that was ultimately rejected. John 1:10-11 says *"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."*

Oh, the pain in God's heart! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" And that unwillingness continues today. You see, just as God called on Israel to respond to His love, He calls on each and every one of us to take up our cross and follow Him. He wants us to respond to His love by simply loving Him back. The bible says that we love God because He first loved us. So, are we willing to respond to that love?