

A City That Stones Its Prophets
Dan McCoig | Luke 13:31-35 | 28 Feb 2010

In Luke, Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem to fulfill his God-given destiny. During Lent, we are on a journey to Easter to discover anew our God-given destiny.

A: What is God calling you to be and do?

B: How do you discern God's call?

C: What in your life may be thwarting your faithful and obedient response to God's call?

D: How are you cooperating with God to remove barriers to faithful and obedient discipleship?

1.

Jesus and Jerusalem are profoundly connected in the gospels.

In Luke's gospel, the whole of Jesus' public ministry is a journey to Jerusalem – the city where he will be arrested, tried, and executed.

Jerusalem is the city where Jesus' parents presented him in the Temple as an infant.

It is the city in which Jesus was left behind following a Passover pilgrimage.

After a frantic search, his family finds him engaged in conversation with the city's religious scholars in the Jerusalem Temple.

It is also the city that welcomed him with shouts of praise and waving palm branches.

In one breath, Jesus berates Jerusalem for its heartlessness as a city that kills God's prophets.

In another breath, Jesus yearns for Jerusalem's transformation.

In yet another breath, Jesus weeps for the city.

2.

Just as there is a serious connection between Jesus and Jerusalem, there is also a serious connection between Jesus and Herod.

Herod beheaded Jesus' friend John the Baptist, thinking that his difficulties with religious figures were solved.

He discovers otherwise.

They are just beginning.

Additionally, there is a connection between Jesus and the Pharisees.

Mostly, the Pharisees are depicted as religious nitpickers who attempt to provoke Jesus into saying things that they can use to build a legal case against him.

However, here in Luke 13, some Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is out to kill him.

At this point, Jesus gives the Pharisees a message for Herod.

Actually, it is more on the order of a taunt.

Jesus engages in a little name-calling [he calls Herod a fox – meaning, either Herod is sly, or Herod is destructive, or Herod is worthless and insignificant; probably, all three] and suggests that Herod is too cowardly to catch him, much less kill him, and that he will enter Jerusalem in his time and in his way.

3.

Traditionally, this passage has been understood as Jesus' lament over Jerusalem.

Jesus' words here are as poignant and as significant as his words in Gethsemane's garden and his words from the cross.

In Gethsemane, Jesus asked that there be another way to redeem the whole of humanity that did not involve Jesus' suffering and death.

Jesus comprehends that there isn't and submits to the will of his loving Father in heaven.

On the cross, Jesus declares his forgiveness upon all who had a hand in his execution and breaths his last.

The cross – an act of divine love for us.

Gethsemane – an act of divine love for us.

The lament over Jerusalem – an act of divine love for us.

4.

In Jesus' lament, Jerusalem is not the holy city.

Jerusalem is a prophet-killing city.

Remember, prophets are persons who speak for God to a particular community.

Prophets declare God's standard for humanity.

For example, the prophet Micah posed the most fundamental question of all when it comes to our relationship with God: What does the Lord require of you?

Micah answered his question, saying: To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

What happens, I wonder, in the life of a city's people where the city is no longer known as holy, but becomes known as a prophet killer?

Simplistically, I guess we could say that they – let's change the pronoun here and personalize it – that we have turned our back on God and gone our own way.

Essentially, that is true.

But, my experience tells me that abandoning God is seldom done in a single moment.

Rather, it is a slow progression.

It is a lot of little turning-aways.

No one sets out to do injustice or at least I hope not, though some persons may.

Instead, the definition of justice is altered, pared down, perhaps even distorted.

Distinctions are made – some people get more justice than others and some people get less justice than others and maybe some people simply don't get any justice at all.

That's the way things are.

We can't do anything about it.

We shouldn't do anything about it.

As for kindness and humility, well what do we really mean by kindness and humility anyway?

You have your understanding and I have mine, it's relative.

And, things like kindness and humility are contextual, aren't they?

The when and the where and the who determine kindness' meaning as well as humility's meaning.

You see where there is going don't you.

Before long, we are calling all the shots and have crafted a world determined by our standards rather than God's.

And, those who would speak on God's behalf, the prophets, become inconvenient, troublesome, an annoyance.

Something should be done about them.

They are not contributing to the peace.

They are disturbing the peace.

This was some of the Pharisees' thinking.

This was evidently Herod's thinking as well.

5.

Despite Jerusalem's darkening mind and hardening heart, Jesus' love for Jerusalem persists and will not be thwarted.

This is the theological heart of the passage.

It's the hope of the passage.

We darken our minds.

We harden our hearts.

At no point does God say, "Enough is enough."

God persists in his love for us.

Commentator William Barclay identifies the ways in which some of the Pharisees distorted their relationship with God.

We can substitute the word Christians or believers for the word Pharisees.

Some became "Sleeve Pharisees."

Let's say believers.

They wore their religion on their sleeve so that everyone could see it and admire them.

Some became "Wait-a-Little Believers."

They came up with excuse after excuse as to why things on the order of justice, kindness, and humility could be put off for another day – now simply was not the time.

Some became "Bent Double Believers."

They bowed low and shuffled in feigned humility, much like Charles Dickens' character Uriah Heep from the novel David Copperfield.

The practice of their faith was pretense; it was for show; it lacked substance.

Some became "Ever Reckoning Believers."

They kept a detailed Excel spreadsheet.

One column was good deeds.

The other column was sins.

They had every intention of presenting their spreadsheets to God because by their calculations the tally of good deeds always exceeded the tally of sins.

Some became "Timid Believers."

They were paralyzed by their fear of God.

Their religion was more haunting than helping.

And, thankfully, some were "God Loving Believers."

They lived in faith and charity.

If Jerusalem had too few God loving believers and too many of other sorts of religious or irreligious persons, it's easy to see how prophets would not be welcome in the least.

Comparably, if any community – this one perhaps – has too few God lovers, any message from God to us is going to have a very hard time getting through.

Our ears will have become tin.

6.

The Thoughtful Christian Sunday school class is reading Timothy Keller's best-selling book *The Reason for God*.

Keller is the senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.

One of the chapters of the book is entitled "Religion and the Gospel."

Keller says that religion refers to salvation by moral effort.

He says that gospel refers to salvation through grace.

According to Keller, "religion" damages the inner soul as well as creates social strife.

"Religion" fosters communities that tend to be self-righteous, exclusive, insecure, angry, and moralistic.

By contrast, the "gospel" fosters communities that are quite different; communities that are humble and inclusive, secure and serene, and empathetic to humanity's brokenness.

Religious communities, using Keller's definition, are going to be prophet-killing communities.

There is a no room for a word from God.

Gospel communities, again using Keller's definition, are going to be prophet-embracing communities.

They yearn for a word from God and embrace it when it comes.

Gospel communities know that our relationship with God is by grace and grace alone.

Members of gospel communities know that they are flawed, but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, loved, saved, and valued beyond measure.

Understanding this imbues the community with humility as well confidence to live boldly.
7.

Luke tells the story of Jesus in such a way that he invites his readers to enter the story, because it is a story of God for us.

Jesus in the garden prayed for another way.

He trusted God and went to the cross with all of its agony and abandonment, all of its suffering and sacrifice.

Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem presents communities with different ways of relating to God.

We can receive God in Christ by grace through faith and allow God to brood over us like a mother hen.

Or we can deny God in Christ by grace through faith and grieve God's heart.

In Luke, Jesus remains on his journey to Jerusalem, with or without Jerusalem's acceptance or denial of him.

This is Luke's way of saying that absolutely nothing will get in the way of God saving the world, nothing.

Amen.