

“A BROKEN-HEARTED GOD”
Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35
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In the area in which we live, where diversity is highly valued and religious tolerance is held up as an ideal; in a country where freedom of religion is part of the Constitution (the first of our Bill of Rights,) we sometimes forget that persecution for one’s religious beliefs has often been the norm. Across the centuries, millions of people have died because of their beliefs, and indeed, religious persecution is commonplace in many areas of the world today. I have been reading a book entitled *An Eclectic Almanac for the Faithful*, by United Methodist pastor turned Trappist monk, W. Paul Jones. The book is devotional in nature, with a short biography on at least one saint of the church for every day of the year. The chilling fact is that most of the early Christians, whose life stories are shared in this inspirational volume, lost their lives because of their faith. Many of them were martyred in early adulthood. All of them paid a tremendous price for the faith which they held dear.

Faith and belief are often life and death matters. The Pharisees are often seen in a bad light in the Gospels. But in this morning’s Lectionary reading from Luke, the Pharisees actually come to Jesus to warn him to flee for his life. “*Get away from here,*” they tell Jesus, “*Herod wants to kill you.*”

Jesus is in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judea. He has come from the wilderness where he was tempted by the **possessions, prestige and power** of this world. He was tempted to seek material solutions to spiritual problems; he was tempted to worship other things rather than making God his highest priority, and he was tempted to believe that the rules of the universe didn’t apply to him. Jesus passed the test, but sometimes we don’t do as well. Yet we know that God is always willing to forgive us and give us another chance to continue the journey with him.

Now today Jesus is in Jerusalem. Just as he sometimes felt led to withdraw to a mountain or a garden or to the wilderness, Jesus also felt that God was leading him into the public arena, to take a stand for what he believed. Not one to be afraid of controversy, Jesus speaks boldly and openly, even when his words are not popular with those in authority and certainly not politically correct. Jerusalem represents more than a city. Jerusalem was far more than a geographical location in the minds of Jesus’ audience. It would be like saying “The White House” or “Washington” to an American audience today. We understand that “The White House” is more than a place. It represents our President and his power. “Washington” is not just a city. It is the seat of government influence and policy.

When the Pharisees tell Jesus to get out of Jerusalem for his own safety, Jesus politely refuses to leave. He says he must continue to teach and to heal in that place. When the Pharisees

remind him that Herod is an evil ruler who will stop at nothing to maintain his power, Jesus replies, *“Go, 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.’”*

As 21st century Christians, we recognize these words as an allusion to the Resurrection. But we also note that here Jesus declares his intention to stay the course, knowing that it will ultimately cost him his life. When we face opposition and even persecution, can we find encouragement and inspiration in these words and actions of Jesus? I confess, too often in the face of opposition, I become paralyzed, and I simply back down. Jesus kept moving forward, in spite of those who criticized him for doing so. Jesus knew what God had called him to do, and he stayed the course. Will we?

Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem, to the center of his nation’s power, and to minister there, but his description of the city is not flattering. He says it is a city that *“kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”* The Temple was located in Jerusalem, the place where the rich heritage of the Jewish people was celebrated and kept alive. If any place on earth should have been open and receptive to God’s messengers, it should have been Jerusalem. But the very opposite was often true --- God’s messengers were usually unwelcome there and violently rejected.

Can you hear the emotion in Jesus’ voice as he says, *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem”*? Later on in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus weeps over the city. In today’s reading, Jesus may not be crying with his eyes, but he is crying with his heart. Here we see **a broken-hearted God**. The Lord practically bleeds out of the deep desire of his heart as he sobs, *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I desired to gather your children together.”* It sounds as though Jesus would like to throw his arms around the people of Jerusalem and hug them to his heart. In spite of their hostility to him, his love for them is not diminished one iota. He would like to draw them to himself, to comfort and support them. His invitation is wet with tears. He can’t make his love for them more clear.

Then Jesus uses a touching illustration, *“How often,”* he reflects, *“have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”* See the mother hen clucking to her chicks to come to the nest. One chick is getting dangerously near the horses and could be crushed under a hoof. Another is wandering off near the road. Still another can get lost in the tall grass. The tiny chicks come running when the hen clucks. They climb in the nest and settle under the mother bird. She spreads her wings over the dozen chicks, and they are secure and warm and safe in her shelter.

Never has there been a time when we have more desperately needed to hear that **the God we worship is a gathering God**. We are such a scattered, fragmented, frightened people. We need a God who can reach out and pull the pieces back together again.

We are scattered physically. For years telephone companies have urged us to “reach out and touch someone” with a phone call. Ironically, touch is the one thing you can’t do by phone. Yet the phone companies have been smart in using such an appeal because they know how scattered we are. Families that used to live in the same city, even the same neighborhood, now are spread from New York to Florida to California. The average American moves five times in a lifetime. Many of us far exceed the national average!

Not only are we scattered physically, but emotional forces tear at our lives, pulling us this way and that. We continually hear about stress and stress management. Work demands one thing, family life another, and our own personal lives something else. We are scattered, fragmented, stressed out, if you will.

The most serious scattering of our lives, though, is the destructive damage of sin. No one ever described the scattering power of sin better than the Apostle Paul, where, in Romans 7, he talks about the tug of war that sin creates, *“Why don’t I do the things I want to do?”* Paul cries in an exasperating voice, *“And why do I do the things I don’t want to do?”* Can anyone relate?

Sin scatters our relationship with God and our relationships with others. “Brokenness” is one of the best ways to describe the effects of sin. Like a beautiful piece of china that has fallen on a hard floor, our lives are often broken in dozens of pieces as sin scatters us.

What good news it is to hear that God is a gathering God! Not just a creating God, important as that is. Not only a forgiving God, essential as that is. We have a God who reaches out to pull the pieces of our lives back together again. You would think that the sign on God’s door would read, “Oh, no! Not you again!” But far from it! Miracle of miracles! God’s love reaches out to draw us in. “*How often have I desired to gather your children together,*” really means, “*Always, every day and every night, I want to gather your children together.*” This is the deepest desire of God’s heart. This is the thing for which God lives. Jesus called Jerusalem to come to God. Jesus calls Cleveland to come to God. God’s arms can enfold us all. We were created to be at home under the wings of Almighty God.

When I was in high school and working to become an Eagle Scout, one of the requirements was a Lifesaving Merit Badge. When I took my lifesaving class at the old YMCA in downtown Akron, the instructor reminded us over and over again of the tendency of a drowning person to thrash, kick, and even beat the lifeguard. Typically, the very one who needs help fights against the person who is sent to rescue him. Even when the lifeguard’s arms are reaching out as a sign of safety, the drowning swimmer will react with fear, pushing away the very one who is there to help.

Doesn’t that describe the way we respond to God? After Jesus’ tearful and repeated invitation to Jerusalem, he sums up the people’s response in four words, “*You were not willing!*” God’s arms are open wide. Tears of love roll down the cheeks of Jesus, and no one is coming to those arms! God has come to earth with good news and Jerusalem will have none of it!

Our rejection of God takes many forms. In a world of cruel scarcity among millions, a luxury cruise line advertises, “A little too much is just about right.” As a society we have become like the little girl whose teacher asked her to spell “banana.” “I know the letters,” she replied, “I just don’t know when to stop!” Knowing when to stop is a sign of maturity. How many of us have turned our backs on God and are simply doing as we please?

Did you know that the United States has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy of any industrialized nation in the world? Instances of violent crime continue to rise. Our murder rate is more than ten times that of Japan; rape is 25 times higher, robbery 150 times more frequent. The United States is more violent in defying God than Jerusalem ever thought of being.

We live in a violent nation. We are part of a society that uses violence to cope with its problems. Remember the shocking statistics that Dr. Kenneth Greet shared with us when he addressed our congregation on the subject of world peace? Dr. Greet said that the century just concluded was the most violent century in the history of the human race. Six million people were killed in wars in the seventeenth century; seven million in the eighteenth century; nineteen million in the nineteenth century; but in the twentieth century, a horrifying and bloodcurdling **109 million lives** were lost due to the atrocities of war. He said we have one doctor for every 2,000 people in the world, while we have one soldier for every 240 people. It’s enough to break God’s heart.

Not only do we turn our backs on God, we think we are clever in doing so. A man found his parked car badly damaged in a supermarket parking lot. His spirits brightened when he saw a note under his windshield wiper blade. The note read, “Dear sir, I have just bumped into the side of your car. The people who saw me do this are still watching. They think I am now writing my name and address on this piece of paper, but they are wrong!” “*America, America, how often have I desired to gather you into my arms, but you were not willing.*”

There was once a young prince who fell in love with a young woman in his kingdom. This prince was wealthy, of noble birth, and had a promising future. But his love was rejected by the young woman. The harder he tried to win her love, the more stubbornly she refused him.

One day he caught sight of her in the ocean drowning in the waves. At the risk of his own life, and ultimately, at the cost of his life, he rescued her. Only then did she realize how deep his love for her had been. She spent the rest of her life living for the high ideals that the prince who gave his life for her had demonstrated. My friend, **the Prince of Glory loves you and gave his life for you.** He died and rose again to save you with his love. *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Cleveland, Cleveland, how often have I desired to gather you into my arms, but you were not willing!”*

Jesus’ heart is broken; God’s heart is broken. Yet there’s a bright spot at the end of the story. Jesus concludes his message by saying, *“I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* Bible scholars are not sure to what Jesus is referring. Is he alluding to the coming Palm Sunday parade? Does he mean after his resurrection, or at his second coming? I believe that we can see Jesus whenever we turn from our sins and ask for God’s mercy in the name of our crucified and risen Lord. And when we welcome those who come in the name of Jesus, we welcome Christ himself.

The things that are happening in Cleveland and across the country are enough **to break God’s heart.** I believe that the Almighty is weeping over our sin as a people and our sin as individuals. Yet God offers a way out. In the midst of our scatteredness and waywardness, God offers to gather us into God’s arms, and to put the broken pieces of our lives back together again. Amidst the fear and lawlessness that has gripped our society, God offers help and hope.

Isn’t it about time we allow God to put his arms around us and draw us close? Isn’t it time we let ourselves be gathered in?

Prayer: Dear God, when we read that your Son wept over Jerusalem, we sense that he is also weeping over our city and over our sin today. Draw us close to yourself, dear God. Forgive our sin, and restore us to a right relationship with you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.