

Luke 13:31-35
March 17, 2019

Jerusalem

St. Louis, my home city, is built just below the confluence of the Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi Rivers. Columbus is centered where the Olentangy and Scioto Rivers meet. Cleveland is on Lake Erie. San Antonio in Texas sits on top of a vast aqueduct. Wherever there are people, there will be water.

The City of Jerusalem is built around a spring called Gihon, one that supplies the Pool of Siloam, which was built by King Hezekiah to bring the water inside the city walls in case they were attacked. Archaeological evidence indicates the presence of shepherds there as far back as 5 or 6 thousand years ago, making it one of the oldest places of continuous human inhabitation in the world.

Much of its history has been contentious. It has been destroyed at least twice, captured and re-captured at least twice, and attacked 52 times. Most cities are never attacked, or if so, it only happens once.

Most notably, Jerusalem is known for the three major religious traditions that consider it a holy place; Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. It is not considered a city of commerce or political power, but of spirituality because of its religious history.

In Judaism it is the City of David where he and Solomon reigned in Israel's golden age, and the place of Solomon's Temple and later the one Herod built. In

Islam it is the location of Muhammed's night journey and also the Dome of the Rock, the mosque that sits on top of the foundation of Herod's Temple, it's 3rd most holy sight. For Christianity, it is the place where Jesus was crucified, and raised from death, and where many events occurred, the prayer in the garden, the last supper, the triumphal entry just to name a few.

I have never been there though I admit that if I ever get the chance, I would likely take it and go. For many people around the world, it is a place of pilgrimage. Issues relating to its occupation and governance are a part of contemporary discourse and it is at the center of some of the world's most unsolvable conflicts; a divided city, characterized by strife, and conflict.

The Journey

Turns out, Jesus went there too. The scriptures don't tell us how many times he was there, but it may be assumed to have been a regular habit. According to Luke, he was circumcised there, and visited with his parents at the age of 12. It is safe to suggest at least annual visits in his adulthood. Today we have heard this remarkable passage that indicates his feelings for this sacred city at the time before what would turn out to be his final visit.

It is a lament, an expression of grief and sorrow. He speaks from the divine perspective of a longing for peace and wholeness and for a thriving prosperity for the city and its inhabitants. He laments the failure of its people to accept this vision.

He speaks like a mother to her children, who won't stop bickering with one another. We see in this text one of the places in scripture where God is presented in a feminine way, in this case as a hen, thus justifying the use of the female pronoun for God, "she." And as he speaks he contemplates both the city's history and his present journey. He goes there to die.

The Big Picture

The grief of Jesus over Jerusalem all those centuries ago may stand for God's grief over the whole human drama played out in time, and throughout the world. This gospel, in both its tragedy and glory, is the story of the human race.

One might read it this way:

"O human beings, you who kill or defame those who come to you with an accurate assessment of the state of things and a vision of peace and justice; and calls to set aside greed and malice and fear, calls to sacrifice one's own well-being for the sake of the world's betterment; How I have longed to gather all your children together, like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you are simply not willing. Look at your empty house."

We do well to pay attention to the sorrow of Jesus and to our own sorrow. We grieve the loss of what we value, and sometimes our sorrow takes us by surprise because it reveals that we sometimes fail to celebrate

what we cherish, but only learn of it upon its loss. You don't know what you've got until it is gone.

What We Mean By Sin

There are many things to grieve in our time. One thinks of the shooting at the mosques in New Zealand this past Friday. Sadly, whenever one starts mentioning such events, one finds it hard to know when to stop and even then, inevitably, something will be left out. Only you know what is particular to your own life. The theological word for the failure of human nature in these tragedies is sin.

The notion of sin has been wielded like a weapon to manipulate with, to enable unscrupulous leaders to make people feel guilty in order to get them to do something. In this way it has been misused, and is never my intention. Still, it must be spoken if we are ever to understand ourselves and why these tragedies occur.

In the Bible, sin is a part of the human story, it is a part of the accurate assessment of things. It is universal and inescapable. It is the conclusion after a sober, realistic analysis of the human situation and must be taken seriously. Clearly it is the object of Jesus' sorrow.

In this story we see Jesus applying this tragic message in his own situation and to his own people. The key to understanding his message, is by seeing it not as their story but our own, and accepting one's

participation in it. That is, if we are judging others, we have missed the point. Sin is a human problem, not a religious one, or a national, racial, or ethnic one, not tied to party or creed. It is clear that what Jesus grieves is the lack of love and faith he finds in his beloved city, in this beloved world.

The Promise

But this is not a tragic lament, for it is filled with resolve and hope. Jesus is intent on the achievement of his goal, and filled with conviction that his hopes will be vindicated. He quotes from the 118th Psalm, which is a song about the coronation of a king and brings forth images of Palm Sunday, with its images of consecration and peace.

Upon his entrance into the holy city he is greeted by the people at the gate with the words of the 118th Psalm, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” It turned out that they did not mean it in an unconditional way, but after one week changed their mind.

Part of the history of Israel and of the world is the too often failure to accept the people who rise up to lead the world away from the tragic results of their sinfulness. Yet in spite of his sorrow over his present situation, Jesus was filled with hope that one day the world would indeed bless the ones who come in God’s name. His hope was that future generations would see him crucified and accept him as God’s messenger of reconciliation.

It would have been impossible for Jesus to continue his journey without this hope. In these words we find what John the evangelist may have called “living water.” Just like St. Louis is fed by the mighty rivers and Cleveland by the lake, and the City of David by the old spring called Gihon, may we find a deep well of compassion and forgiveness welling up from within God’s nature, not only for us, but for all the world’s people.

God grieves for Jerusalem and the world because God loves them. May we sit in the silence of this moment and contemplate that love and sorrow; and let it be for us like a spring of living water welling up in us to eternal life; and let us also love world so much that we too grieve over it, hope for it, and with God’s help sacrifice for it.

This love and hope and sorrow are a part of what it means to be faithful, to accept Christ into our hearts, and to follow him on his journey and make God’s path our own. May our faith be increased by these meditations.

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