



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Second Sunday of Lent

March 17, 2019

“God’s Gathering Love”

(Luke 13:34)

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“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Luke 13:34).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

We all know people who refuse to be helped. The elderly man who will not see a doctor when everyone else knows he should. Or the young woman who suffers from anxiety and depression, who, as soon as she starts feeling better, stops taking her meds. Or the high-schooler who refuses to ask the teacher for some extra support after school. It's the husband who refuses to go to marriage counseling. It's the middle aged man whose drinking is starting to wreck his life, but he denies there's a problem and says he can stop anytime he wants. It's the elderly woman who refuses to consider moving into assisted living, though she can no longer care for herself and is regularly falling. It's hard to watch people refuse the help they so desperately need. Individuals can do that. So can entire cultures.

In our text, Jesus is grieving over Jerusalem which had become a city that was rejecting God and the help he was offering. I don't think the change happened all at once, but it is frightening how rapidly cultures and cultural values can change. Think of Germany in the 1930's, or China, during the cultural revolution, or the dramatic changes in our own culture the last couple of decades. So also in ancient Jerusalem, the culture changed rapidly and not for the good. The people were deceived. They were blinded. They were beguiled by sin and its author. As a result, they got to the point where they were no longer willing or even able to hear the Word of God. They couldn't tolerate it. It grated on their ears. They so hated God's Word that it wasn't just a matter of refusing to listen anymore. No, they actively put to death God's prophets, one after another, and ultimately did the same to God's Son, the Word Incarnate.

Remember the parable of the wicked tenants? A wealthy man planted a vineyard and hired some tenants to take

care of it. Then he went off to another country for a long while on business. When the time came to expect a harvest, he sent a servant to fetch some of the fruit. That servant was beaten up by the tenants and sent on his way; he came back to the owner bruised and bloodied but also empty-handed. So the owner sent another servant. They chewed him up too and spit him out, and he hobbled back with cracked ribs and bandages around his head. He sent a third, and this one also came back empty handed, except for the crutches. Now, in reality, any owner would demand swift and decisive justice. But this is a parable and strange things happen in parables . . . in order to make a point. This owner says to himself, “What shall I do? I will send my son. Perhaps they will listen to him.” And you know what happens to the son; they promptly put him to death. (Lk. 20:9-19)

This parable is, of course, about the killing of God’s prophets, and the forthcoming execution of God’s Son. One point it makes is that no one can say the owner didn’t try. No one can claim the owner wasn’t patient and long-suffering. When the owner finally lowered the boom on those wicked tenants, no one can say he did so unjustly, or that he wasn’t being fair. He gave them every opportunity to repent.

So it was with ancient Jerusalem. God was patient and long-suffering desperately trying to turn them around. God takes no pleasure even in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23). So he sent one prophet after another with predictable and tragic results. And then he sent his Son. Notice the rare irony in Jesus’ words: “It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem” (v. 33). Can you sense his frustration?

It quickly turns into sadness and pity. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing.”

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem.” There’s no thunder in the repetition: just grief. The grief of David comes to mind. “O

my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33). Jesus wanted desperately to save his people, had his wings of mercy outstretched for them, but the chicks would have none of it.

A number of years ago I was at the Dodge County Fair. In the poultry barn, on the south end there was a hen in a cage with her wings stretched out. It was hot. She was in the sun. I was wondering is this how a hen cools herself? But all of a sudden a number of chicks poked their heads out from underneath each wing. She was sheltering the chicks from the intense heat. I’ve since learned when there’s a fire in a chicken house, hens will cover their chicks with their wings and actually let the fire roll over them, without running away. Afterwards, one can lift up the charred carcass of the hen and find the chicks have been saved. That’s what Jesus was willing to do. That’s what Jesus did, for all who are willing to be gathered under his wings.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” Of course, this text is a cautionary text to God’s people today, to you and me: Don’t resist the gathering love of Jesus. Don’t become a place of subtle forms of violence against one another or against God’s Word. I say subtle because the easiest way to break up a gathering is by being mean to one another, ungracious, unkind. And the easiest way to stone a prophet today is to simply tune him out, not bother coming to worship, not really listen to God’s Word, or put it into action.

Don’t resist the gathering love of Jesus. Don’t cut yourself off from His Word or Sacraments or from the mutual encouragement of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Most prisoners would say the worst form of legal punishment is solitary confinement. The United Nations calls it a form of torture. Even big, muscular, hardened criminals, when isolated physically and socially from other human beings, they really start to suffer.

Similarly, it's hard to be a solitary Christian. Some say it's impossible. A lot of people like to say, "I don't really need the church to be a Christian." If that's you, think again. The church is God's idea. He's constantly gathering us together as his church. That's his impulse. Our impulse is often to remove ourselves from the company of other Christians, and do our own thing. But in the Bible, Christian faith does not exist apart from community. In fact, from beginning to end in the Bible, God is gathering people together as a community, a people. In the Bible, faith means we are part of a flock; that's where we are safe. But you can't be a member of a flock in isolation. The one who abandons the flock and the shepherd is alone in the wilderness, not a good place for a lamb. Someone needs to gather that one in again (Lk. 15:3-7). Listen to these powerful words of Jesus from Matthew 12: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me, scatters" (v. 30).

Who needs a church? You do. I do. Most amazing of all, God does. For all the faults and failures and struggles and embarrassments, the local congregation is still where God wants us to be, not just on some roster, but gathered around Word and Sacrament, safely nestled under his wings of grace. It can even be a very small group of Christians, for example a home Bible Study, or a Stephen Ministry relationship. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Mt. 18:20). God's impulse is to gather us together.

Makes me think of Noah's ark, an historic symbol for the church. God gathered together everything imaginable. In they walked (or flew or slithered) two by two. Then God shut the door. Inside it was such an exotic collection of species. At times the stench was so bad it probably made Noah want to jump overboard. But then there was all that floating flotsam in the water, all that rotting flesh; no other help in sight. Only in the ark was there life and salvation.

When God gathers us around Word and Sacrament, that's where life and salvation is found. Outside God's

Word and Sacraments, no promises, no assurances. It makes me think of our members who are homebound. It's imperative we find ways to keep them connected.

God's impulse is to gather us together. So in the communion liturgy we pray, "Gather us together from the ends of the earth to celebrate with all the faithful the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end." Makes me think of the Parable of the Wedding Feast where the king sends his servants out to the highways and street corners to invite everyone they can find, with reckless abandon, both the good and the bad. Gather them, that the wedding hall may be filled with guests (Lk. 14:15-24).

God's impulse is to gather us together. Don't resist his gathering love. Hebrews 10 says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another" (v. 25). Acts 2 says those in the early church "Devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . And day by day, attending the temple *together* and breaking bread also in their homes" (v.42ff).

In Zechariah 10 we hear a wonderful promise of a gathering yet to come. "I will bring [my people] back because I have compassion on them. . . I will whistle for them [I love that!] I will whistle for them and gather them in, for I have redeemed them. . . Though I scattered them among the nations, yet in far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return. I will bring them home" (v. 6ff).

When Toby my chocolate lab gets too far from me in the woods I whistle for him. There's no better sight than to see him running with a full head of steam (towards me that is; not so good when he's running the other way)! So it is for the Lord; it brings him joy to whistle us home.

Which leads us to one final gathering yet to come. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were

holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God” (Rev. 7:9ff). That is, he’s the one who has gathered us here.

The Lord’s impulse is to gather us as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. Never resist his gathering love. Amen.

