

Lent 2**Sowing Tears, Reaping Joy****Luke 13:31-35**

A sermon preached by the Reverend Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH on February 28, 2010.

Over the last few weeks as I was living with the gospel text which we just heard, I received an email from a mentor, the former Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in St. Louis. He wrote to tell me of a new book by Walter Brueggemann, one of the finest biblical scholars of our day, called *Journey to the Common Good*, a prophetic word for our times in which the common good seems to be of little concern to people in power.

In his email, Michael, my mentor, told me of his first encounter with Brueggemann, who was then teaching at Eden Seminary in St. Louis. Michael asked him to lead a day long retreat for the tired and discouraged urban ministers, both lay and clerical, on the subject of hope. "The day arrived and Brueggemann told us we would spend the day reading the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Until we mourned the death of St. Louis, the death of the false promises, we could not accept the true promises of God, he said."

Winter in Cleveland may put us in the spirit of lamentation, being a harsh and stark season. Yet when branches are stripped bare, one can see the structure of the trees and the horizon beyond. Martin Marty writes of the soul's experience of winter: "So, I have always found that it is in the impression of the absence of God where his presence is most felt, that in the wintry spirituality one sees more clearly." I don't know about you, but lately I have been getting up to here with this "wintry spirituality". It takes many forms. Disasters in Haiti and Chile. Meeting grieving families to plan a funeral. Hearing from too many parishioners who wrestle with news of a frightening diagnosis or unemployment or family stress. Watching the gruesome reports of earthquakes in Haiti and Chile. Listening to our Armed Services Outreach Group as they seek to provide support to members in the military and their families here at home and meeting with Stephen Ministers who companion others in a wintry time of their lives.

When I offered to lead an adult study on Brahms' *Requiem* during Lent, I thought it would be a pastoral offering for individuals who experience grief, but I probably didn't think enough about how all-encompassing that number might be. As we gather to listen to this marvelous music and the texts Brahms chose to convey the journey from mortality to immortality, we are called to embrace a faith that God's saving hope is to be found by "leaning into the pain" of our lives, weeping with those who weep, standing with the vulnerable and needy. Yet, like our Gospel lesson, the saving hope of faith that gives expression to our laments has a farther reach than that of individual consolation.

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem occurs in the midst of an extended Travel Narrative in Luke's gospel that covers over 10 chapters as he travels from Galilee to Jerusalem. Today's text finds him being warned by Pharisees, an unlikely source, that King Herod wants to kill him. The

Herod of this story is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas was not really a king, but a Roman puppet. He ruled not by right, but at the pleasure of the Roman emperor.

Leslie Hoppe wrote of Herod: "Jesus had no use for Antipas. During his Galilean ministry, he never entered two cities particularly associated with Antipas: Sepphoris,...and Tiberias,... These cities represented the antithesis of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. They were monuments to Romanize the people of Galilee. Jesus came to call the people to repentance and faith. He called them to renew their commitment to their ancestral religious traditions. Antipas and his supporters also wished to lead the people of the Galilee to a new world—a world whose center was Rome and whose values were opposed to the values of the gospel."

Recognizing the agenda of Herod and his Roman patrons who sought to rule by might and power instead of justice, Jesus doesn't run and hide, but responds with disdain, "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.'" Then he speaks his lament over Jerusalem, the city that kills God's prophets instead of listening to them. Jesus knows where he is going and why—and it has something to do with us as well. He goes to Jerusalem because the foxes of the world want to have their way. He goes there because of us. But he goes there, not to fight, but to bare his breast like a mother hen.

Could there be a greater contrast than that of a fox and a mother hen? In Hellenistic thought the fox is regarded as clever, but sly and unprincipled. We have foxes in our day too, don't we? Some of them occupy visible seats of power in government, in business, even in the church. They may rightly claim that they seek the best interests of others, the advantages of those whom they represent, but in reality, they are controlled by self-interest and security. But, lest we assume that it is only the powerful in whom we find these motives we must acknowledge our own longing for control that leads us to compromise with or be resigned to the evils of this world. As we just confessed, none of us have loved God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves. We may not like it, but we have each made our own peace with the "foxes" who promise us security, haven't we?

However, in spite of our self-serving priorities, Jesus does not forsake us or even the Herods of this world. Gazing at the "Jerusalems" in which we live, Jesus still longs to gather us under his wings. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, than you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world—wings spread, breast exposed—but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand." Jesus' lament is not a pronouncement of judgment, but an invitation to repentance, an invitation to find hope and peace by following his way of suffering love that is the only way to lasting peace for all people.

As we listen to Jesus' lament, I believe the challenge for us is to hear it not only as a word of consolation to individuals, but as a charge to the church. In the families,

neighborhoods, cities and nations in which foxes still seek to divide and conquer, to operate unilaterally and arrogantly, there has never been a greater need for the spirit of the gathering mother hen, the consolidating and compassionate Christ, who points us away from ourselves and to the needs of all humankind.

Perhaps Walter Brueggemann had it right when he had the urban missionaries of St. Louis spend the day reading the Lamentations of Jeremiah and mourning the death of false promises. Unless we unburden ourselves of those false promises that tell us success is the way to fulfillment; that security comes through power; that we must accept that progress will always have casualties or leave people behind, we will never experience the transforming hope of the gospel that comes through imitating Jesus' way of justice and loving sacrifice.

In the first movement of Brahms' *Requiem* there is a chorus based on Psalm 126, "They who with tears sow will with joy reap. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." The one thing that mourners have in abundance is tears. The mindboggling image offered by the Psalmist is that the tears of those who mourn should be seen as seeds of a bountiful and joyful harvest. Nicholas Wolterstorf, in his book, *Lament for a Son*, described the tear-stained faith of those mourners whom Jesus called "blessed". "Who then are the mourners? The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for that day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence." Wolterstorf then goes on, "The Stoics of antiquity said: Be calm. Disengage yourself. Neither laugh nor weep. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity's mourning, weep over humanity's weeping, be wounded by humanity's wounds, be in agony over humanity's agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming." (emphasis added)

And so the church looks to the future, standing on the side of God's will for a just, secure and peaceful world. Its hopes may not be realized completely in our time, but the one who bared her breast to stand between us and the fox and who was raised from the dead gives us assurance that there will come a day when the Blessed One who comes in the name of the Lord will shelter all creation under those wings of love. Until that day, Christ Jesus promises to give us strength to stand as he does, between the powers of evil and those who are vulnerable and easily manipulated by fear, trusting that as we do we will see the dawning of that new age in which death itself is swallowed up by love.