

**“How Often Would I Gather”**

*“How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34).*

Lent began with Luke’s account of the temptation of Jesus. In that reading, Satan failed and, finally, abandoned his attempt to move Jesus away from His mission, but, in the final words of that text, Luke tells us that, “when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from (Jesus) until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). It’s hard to know exactly what Luke meant by those words. Many scholars would say that this was a reference to the struggle of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane where He prayed for the “cup” of suffering to be removed, and that’s probably true. Yet, as we move into today’s Gospel reading, we find the devil tempting Jesus once again, and, at this “opportune time,” it’s through the voices of some Pharisees who came to Jesus with the suggestion that He leave their territory because Herod wanted kill Him.

At first glance, it almost seems like these Pharisees are concerned for Jesus, as if they are tipping Him off to protect Him from the danger Herod posed. But Jesus isn’t fooled for one second by their artificial show of concern, and, instead of leaving as they had suggested, Jesus turned the tables on them. He responds with a scathing rebuke, both about His feelings for Herod, and about the work He came to accomplish saying, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem’” (Luke 13:32-33).

In these words, Jesus answered their temptation by affirming His plan to go to Jerusalem, and by letting them know that what He came to do was all part of God’s ultimate purpose, and Jesus illustrated this by pointing to the prophets of the Old Testament. Top to bottom, these Old Testament characters had been called by God to confront His people with harsh and unbending words of judgment...and these were words that God’s people never wanted to hear. We see this demonstrated with great clarity in today’s first reading where Jeremiah stood in the middle of the Temple in Jerusalem and told “all the people” of Judah that, unless they repented of their wickedness, the Lord would destroy their city and leave them “desolate” (Jeremiah 26:9). And the response of the people to this word of warning was an immediate and violent outcry for Jeremiah’s death. “You shall die!” (Jeremiah 26:8). That’s what the people said, and Jesus referenced the fate of Jeremiah and the other Old Testament prophets because what had happened in the past was about to be repeated again as Jesus finished His own “course” in Jerusalem.

You see, God’s people had always rejected His word, and as He spoke to the Pharisees, and even as I speak to you today, this truth remains unchanged. Our Old Adam hates the voice of the prophet. We reel at the imposition of God’s Word. We are offended at the inspired insinuation that our motives are selfish and our hearts are evil, and in our innate need to justify ourselves, we will do whatever it takes to silence the prophet. From the shameless babble of our culture to the private conversations in our bedrooms, the number one priority of our Old Adam is always to

justify itself; to hold up the reasons that we are right in what we think and vindicated in what we do; to manipulate and spin the facts so that our sin is somehow understandable. We have no patience for reflection and no interest in repentance, and just like the sinful people of Jeremiah's day we do whatever we can to get rid of the prophet.

This is why Jesus referenced the prophets of the Old Testament when confronting the Pharisees; and this is why His words have application for us today. You see, in both of our readings, we hear confrontational language – language, in fact, that directly attacks sin – and, when we actually listen to these words of God and apply them to ourselves, we stand convicted – all of us – every single one! In fact, there is no one here today who can claim innocence. We have all together rejected the words of the prophet. We have not been willing.

And yet, even in the midst of this unbridled attack on our sin, we also hear words that reveal the heart of God in Jesus...*and it is a heart that is for us in every way!* In a desperate tone of profound lament, Jesus says: “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...” (Luke 13:34). This image is largely lost on us today, but it is one of the most poignant and moving in all of nature. Those of you who have spent time on a farm can attest to the truth behind Jesus' words that when a storm or predator is threatening her brood, the mother hen will aggressively, desperately gather her chicks under her wings to save them from danger. And *this is the image* Jesus uses to communicate the fierce, undying, sacrificial love that God has for His people. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings...”

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem where He will finish His course. He knows that He is going there to die. He is facing unimaginable suffering and an unthinkable end, and yet, here, in the midst of His rebuke, Jesus reveals His saving purpose. You see, Jesus came for the very people who would cry out: “You shall die!” Jesus came for the very people who would plot His demise and direct His arrest; who would preside over His false trial and scourge His innocent back. He came for the Pharisees who rejected Him, and for Judas who betrayed him, and for Peter who denied him; for the disciples who abandoned Him and the soldiers who abused Him. Like a mother hen who would gather her chicks under her wing, with no regard for her own safety, Jesus desired to save all of them – and all of us! And for all of us sinners, Jesus died!

Today, God is calling you through the voice of the Prophet. And it is not too late! Today, in these strong words of God, your sin has been uncovered and your nature has been revealed, and in the promise of your baptism you have been drowned and you have died, and – just as Jesus completed His course “on the third day” – today you have been raised with Christ.

Today, you are a new creation and a citizen of heaven. And, today, the One who comes in the name of the Lord *comes for you...* to gather you under His wings...to forgive you of all your sins...to bring you an unconditional and irrevocable promise of life. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today in words and work of His Son. Amen.

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