

Second Sunday in Lent; March 16, 2025
+ Luke 13:31-35 +

In that very hour, some Pharisees came to him and said, “Leave, and go away from here, because Herod wants to kill you.”

He said to them, “Go tell that fox, ‘Look, I am going to drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the next day, because it cannot be that a prophet would be killed outside Jerusalem!

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I have wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you will say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

Do you know if anyone has ever written a song about Woodbridge? What about Dale City? Stafford? Many famous cities have songs written about them. Sinatra sang “New York, New York,” Elvis crooned, “Viva, Las Vegas!” and Scott McKenzie left his heart in San Francisco. Worldwide, Tokyo, Havana, and Istanbul have all been the center of songs. And you may snicker at the thought of someone adoring Woodbridge in song, but you don’t have to be big or beautiful to be exalted in song. Lefty Frizzell wrote about Saginaw, Michigan, and Jerry Lee Lewis sang about Milwaukee. (Actually, it was more about beer than Milwaukee; but it’s a distinction with no difference!)

People tend to write about cities they love. The most-sung-about city in history may well be Jerusalem. The Bible is the best-selling book in history, and it’s full of songs about Jerusalem. Jerusalem: the capital city of ancient Israel, the beloved city of the people of God, home to the Lord’s holy temple, his own dwelling place. Psalm 121: **I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD. Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a well-built city that is firmly joined together.”** Or Psalm 128: **May the LORD bless you from Zion [Jerusalem], so that you see the prosperity of Jerusalem, all the days of your life, and you see your children’s children.** Psalm 116: **I will fulfill my vows to the LORD here in the presence of his people, in the courtyards of the LORD, in the middle of Jerusalem.**

Jerusalem was the city that God had chosen to be his city, the place he promised his temple would stand as his house, and that he would be there, and that everyone who called on him from that temple he would hear. Hopefully we all love our neighborhoods and cities, but none of us love them in quite the same way that the people of Israel loved Jerusalem. Wherever they were in the world, whether on business or in exile, they bowed toward Jerusalem when they prayed. To this day, most Jewish people say at the end of Passover Seder, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

So now, picture Jesus in the middle of Jerusalem, and hear what he says in today’s Gospel: **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I have wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate.”** Desolate: abandoned, empty. And what house is Jesus talking about here? The temple of Jerusalem, where God had promised to dwell, the heart of the City of God was empty. Abandoned. Forsaken. God has left the building. Just imagine there being one piece of this

Creation where God is not – and that is what Jesus has told them about the temple of the Lord in his own city. Imagine! Offensive! Offensive, but Jesus says it not because it is offensive but because it is true.

Jesus knows what you and I must learn: if you love someone, and if that person is in danger, then you must tell the truth to that person. To see someone in danger and not say something is the opposite of love. For what is love except to seek the best for that person? “Bob, I love you. And I think you might have a drinking problem. And because I love you I’m telling you: please get help.” “Jane, I love you. And that guy you’re seeing is a bum. I see it and so does everyone except you. And because I love you, I’m saying please get out of that relationship.” “Bert, he’s your son. Do something soon, or he’ll end up in prison. I say it because I love you and him.” We don’t like to say these things. They offend and produce accusations of being judgmental. But there is one kind of offense and judgment that God approves of: the loving kind that speaks the truth in love.

Love compels it, because love seeks the best for those it loves. Jesus seeks the best for Jerusalem. So he says: **“How often I have wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”** Those words radiate with love. Jesus desires to be close to Jerusalem and close to his people. And those words also radiate with offense. “You have not loved me back. And now your house is empty, abandoned, forsaken. God has left the building.”

Those words offended people who loved Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, and still offend today. I spoke once to an Orthodox Jewish rabbi who knows the New Testament well, in the strictly informational sense of knowledge. To this day he is deeply resentful toward Jesus and cited these words as the reason why. It makes me sad that he feels that way. But I understand it. He sees only the offense.

But that Jesus who spoke those loving, offensive words two thousand years ago, words that still offend and love, is the same Jesus who is risen from the dead. The living Jesus sends his Church to preach the same message that he preached, in his name. He has promised that when his Church speaks his Word, when his Church proclaims his Gospel, he himself empowers it. He himself speaks through it. And so we are sent to speak the truth, to confess the truth, to believe the truth, to share it in our homes and in our lives. That truth that often offends people, and still offends our own sinful nature.

That’s part of the nature of the Word of God. The key, of course, is to remember that we don’t preach the Word of God *because* it offends people – a truth some Christians seem to be forgetting sometimes. We preach the Word because God loves people and they deserve to hear it – however they may react to it.

The message that we preach and believe in the Church, the message that we teach our children at home, and that we confess in the Creeds does not necessarily sound like good news the first time you hear it. Imagine yourself asleep at night and your phone rings. You pick it up and hear a voice say, “Don’t be afraid! The cops are on their way to save you!” And you think, “From what? What’s happening? Who are you and how did you get this number, anyway? Is this a joke? Is this true? Why are you making me think about this when I was comfortable and sleeping?” All those questions would come quite naturally and reasonably.

So now remember what our message is: “Do not be afraid. Jesus has come to save you and he is coming again!” “Save me from what? Who are you? Why are you telling me this? Why did you wake me up from my spiritual slumber and force me to think about these things? Is this true?”

We are used to hearing it and saying it; we already believe it and understand it, though imperfectly. “Jesus died to save us from our sins.” “But why die? Why the violence and the blood? Why sin?” And when you

answer that question, the offense gets very, very personal. “Who are you to say that I am one of these sinners?”

None of this is to say we have a bad message. We have a message that is good because it’s true that God loves and saves his people from sin. And how are we to know that we are saved until we know that we must be saved from something. But let’s not imagine that our message is so sweet that all we have to do is say it right and that it will produce faith. People can hear it; all you have to do is speak the language of the land in which you find yourself. People can hear it, but it carries something that sometimes turns hearts away. But it’s also true that some that turn away are turned back by God to that grace and that mercy that we have loved.

And God’s Word is not so weak that it can be stopped by the imperfection of the one speaking it. To think it’s a really pretty message that we need to fortify with our slick efforts defies the divine power of God’s Word. It will work to produce faith by the Spirit’s power. It is only our part to believe it, speak it, confess it, and then let it have its way.

We belong to the man who was crucified for what he said. And he sends us to speak the same message. And yes, it offends. But not always or forever. I have seen people who scoffed and then communed, people who turned away in offense but the seed was planted and they one day turned back in faith, people who rolled their eyes before confessing with their mouth that Jesus is Lord.

For we have a message that says: God is no longer found in this city or that city; he is not found in this country or that country, this building or that building, not even in old Jerusalem or the temple he once told Solomon to build. God is not found in the place, the city, the life you love. God is found in the life that was lost. God is found in this Jesus, whom he raised from the dead, who has become for us the temple of the Lord. With him everything is life, everything is found. With him, God is present. With him we are not forsaken, but we are received and loved.

And that is why, before we stand at this altar where Jesus comes to us, we sing, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” That song is the true song of God’s city – and ours. Amen.