

Lent II Year C

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, How often have I desired to gather up your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings”

Several years ago Katharine and I heard scuttling noises at night up in the attic. Once we had a squirrel who lived up there and it cost us about four hundred dollars to get rid of him. But this time we figured out that it was rats this time....so we called an exterminator recommended by a neighbor...his name was Paul, very solicitous, in an exterminator sort of way....And let me tell you he loves his job...he informed us that he was a third generation exterminator, had worked as one, mentored by his dad, since he was a boy and his particular specialty was rats...you could just tell that he liked nothing more than to don a jumpsuit and crawl all under our house looking for possible clues as to how they might have found their way up into the attic....He began to speak eloquently in his South Alabama rustic accent at length about the habits of mice and rats...about their days and nights....their seasonal movements...their ethos...their *raison d'être*.... “It’s a good thing we’re talking about rats...we can catch them,” he said...squirrels are too smart.

We went up finally into the attic, and with sleuth-like stoicism he began to inspect the attic biosphere with artful precision...his concentration was rapt; a man at one with his place in the universe....Look here he said

with an air of excitement...this is where they have been coming and going... You see, he said with authority, rats have oily skin and fur, and dirt sticks to them ...so when they travel they leave a trace of smudge...see, look at this PVC pipe...they've been travelling on it...see the smudges, I nodded... Well he strategically set traps, and said he'd come back in a few days...we trapped them of course...right where he had predicted.

Now Paul knew I was a priest, and on his second visit, now that we had bonded, he felt emboldened to tell me his faith story...I get that a lot...it comes with the trade....He finished by saying that he goes to Destination Church...asked me if I'd heard of it...I lied and said it sounded familiar....and he got all solemn looking and looked me in the eye and said, you know what I've learned...I didn't have a clue what to expect from this earnest and kind man....I've learned, he said, that God has put us here for the lost of our world.... Now my definition of whom the lost might be probably is different from his; he might have said they are the ones who don't know Jesus; I might have said the lost were the victims of indignity, injustice and violence and poverty but we didn't get into that...I just nodded and agreed and agreed sincerely....because when all is said and done... lost is lost, no matter the definition. We are sent for the good of the lost, he said,

and to love them...wisdom to be sure, whether spoken by Jesus, the Dalai Lama, or spoken by a third generation exterminator from Mobile.

In Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road*, A Man and his young son roam a decimated post apocalyptic landscape, the planet utterly ruined by nuclear holocaust, headed south to try to escape the cold of their world in perpetual winter. The boy is starving and his father is gravely ill. It is a very dark novel in which the dominant question is whether there is meaning or not in just trying to survive. At one point the young son sees another boy about his age wandering alone down an empty street haggard and gaunt...I'm sure the son sees himself mirrored in that boy, and such an image strikes fear into him...He asks his father, "what will happen to him", and his father answers... "Goodness will find him. It always does." Even at the end of the world, Love lives on.... A fragile but resonant premise.

Over the vast sweep of scripture, Hebrew scripture and New Testament literature alike, the theme is about being lost, and then the always imminent possibility of being found and liberated from lostness; You remember Israel was lost for forty years in the desert of Sinai....upon the establishment of the monarchy in Jerusalem, which was to bring about God's just order and well-being, generations of kings systematically turned

their backs to God's ways and to the people God loves. Jerusalem is of course the center of the Jewish universe, the place of the Temple in which God dwells and yet a city which fails time and again to be that holy city that God intends it to be. So Jerusalem becomes the symbol of all the lost...the seat of the corrupt powerful, the suffering poor, a ghetto of injustice, sacked over and over again by powers and principalities over its history...the prophets over the centuries averred that these calamities were God's punishment for Jerusalem's and therefore Israel's infidelity to the true way, their lostness...and therefore the world's lostness, because Israel was chosen by God according to sacred scripture to be a light to the world... The prophets, and here Jesus, pointed an accusing finger at the status quo, and of course as we are told prophets get killed for being so bold.

In our passage today, Luke picks up on this theme. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, his life has been threatened, and we know what will eventually befall him. But his ministry still continues, the dark cloud notwithstanding, bearing goodness along the way to the compromised seat of power. He stops and Laments for Jerusalem the archetypal lost city; but a city with whom still God is madly in Love. On the one hand Jesus offers a scathing critique of the city, and then, choked up, it seems to me, he offers comfort, and the compassionate will for its restoration. The political ramifications of Luke's

Gospel are clear here... He likens the vassal king Herod Antipas, in league with the Romans, to a fox... a cunning predator; and then he likens God's Love to that of a mother hen who will spread her wings and cover her young in the presence of a predator. She will sacrifice her own life to protect those under her care.

That is the great paradox of faith, the prophet's dilemma, as it were, that amid the abject lostness of our world, no matter how squalid or wretched, we are called to love... that I imagine is God's dilemma too, and yet God continues to bear Good through God's people in spite of the worn and broken ramparts of our lost cities, despite the violence and injustice that pervade them... God will love us to the end and beyond. God will persist as ever seeking God's lost people and God will find them and set them free...free from fear and despair and degradation and violence...and orient them towards home...and our freedom, our peace of mind, are intimately bound to the freedom of the lost. That is God's marvelous alchemy; that in loving our neighbor we are loving ourselves.

I had the privilege this past week to meet Bob Zellner, our speaker for this coming Wednesday evening.... Zellner was the first white field coordinator for the civil rights organizing group called SNCC ... the Student non-violent coordinating Committee. That organization was spoken of with

derision in our part of the country back in the sixties. They were called communists and other things I can't repeat from the pulpit.... The New Testament is shot through with accounts of martyrdom by the early disciples of the Jesus Movement... the disciples are continually warned of the danger and the cost of their discipleship.... And I have always been grateful that I haven't had to stare death in the face because of my faith.... But Zellner is a true modern day disciple. He was beaten into unconsciousness in McComb Mississippi by white supremacists. He was arrested on more than one occasion... his life was threatened by members of his own family. I sat in awe as he spoke of Martin and Rosa. He's an old man now, but he is full of life, full of the Spirit. He is an emblem to me of Love's persistence. He has mastered the prophet's dilemma by a life of sacrifice... a life given under the rubric of Love... and he knows that the restoration of Jerusalem is still a work in progress; that it never ends.... But despite the dilemma, his joy is contagious.

Our work, brothers and sisters, is to embrace Jerusalem in our own day; Jerusalem the mirror upon which we see our own collective brokenness and disorientation on the one hand; and the city whose potential is freedom and peace and justice on the other... our work is to love her like a mother loves her children...to tend to, to love our broken and our lost... To stand in

passionate advocacy between them and the predatory brutality of the world. We are called to love the world's brokenness, the world who still kills her prophets...A world smudged with evil...we are called to love the world's brokenness and therefore our own. Jesus chooses to go to Jerusalem for the sake of the lost.... He'd rather be dead than to do otherwise... But maybe it is not so much a choice as it is an awareness of one's place amid God's pattern of being; that to be in God, one is in Love... and Love will always serve the good of the other... that is our choice as well; and not so much a choice but our place in the world; to be about the practice of Love for the world's sake.... to Love our neighbor who is lost and broken more than we Love ourselves, and of course the irony is that loving our neighbor is loving ourselves completely..... But we have to go to the struggle; we have to risk it all for the gracious city of God. It is costly....but know amid the struggle, for struggle it surely is, and surely will be... know amid the temptation to fear; the temptation to despair...know always that goodness will find us....goodness will find us all in God's good time...It always does.