

What Jesus Wants

Psalm 56 Luke 13:31-35

As with last week's passage, in this morning's account some people approach Jesus with what they believe is important information for him. And, as happened in last week's account, Jesus doesn't get pulled into their drama but redirects the conversation to what's really important, especially as it relates to his mission in Jerusalem.

Luke 13:31-35

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He said to them, "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. ³³ 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.'

Jesus now speaks or cries out a lament:

³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

This is the word of the Lord.

There is a sense of foreboding in this account, isn't there?

This scene is a display of the complex struggle of wills and wants, which characterizes the entire gospel story: the ill-will of Jesus' adversaries from his birth to his death, the *determination* of Jesus to give of himself, the *unwillingness* of the religious establishment to really get it (Jerusalem is the symbol of that), the disciples' desire for the victorious path, God's will and desire to fulfill his promises. The intense emotion of this, as expressed in Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, is in *God's* desire to save, which is pitted against human determination to resist it, even when the results will be tragic, and destructive.

Let's look at this passage from the perspective of wants.

What the Pharisees want

It is unclear here what *these* Pharisees really want, or whose side these Pharisees are on. They seem to be on Jesus' side in their warning to him, but we question their sincerity. Because, up to this point in the gospel, the Pharisees, for the most part, have not been Jesus' friends—they have been relentless critics and opponents. Even though some individual Pharisees have emerged as followers of Jesus. Here, though, it's ambiguous what these particular Pharisees want.

To back up a moment, who are the Pharisees? I don't want to assume we all know who these characters are. I'm always learning more about them. The

Pharisees are often thought of as religious professionals, or clergy. But they weren't. They were laypersons, not priests or professional clergy, and these laypersons knew that the professional clergy and religious establishment were corrupt, so they took matters into their own hands and created a social movement and school of thought that represented religious perfection.

They were everyday business owners, shopkeepers, farmers, merchants, who were part of a religious sect, or movement, whose aim was to maintain strict adherence to the Jewish law and tradition—and they created many traditions of their own. They saw the religious professionals, the priesthood in particular, as corrupt—and rightly so, because it was! The Romans had bought off many priests—therefore their goal was to be the keepers (and gatekeepers) of tradition and law.

Which is why they argued with Jesus so much, and why Jesus had some choice words for them at times. Because Jesus turned a lot of tradition on its head, and even broke the Jewish law from time to time, for the sake of mercy. In fact, Jesus' favorite quote to the Pharisees is a line from the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." In other words, you care more about your austerity and your traditions than you do about people. God's heart is a heart of mercy, not religious perfection.

Having said, this, some Pharisees followed Jesus. Nicodemus was an early follower. Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent Pharisee, took responsibility for Jesus' burial after his death and offered his own personal property, a garden which had the tomb where Jesus' body was laid to rest. And from time to time in the gospels we see Jesus having dinner at the home of a Pharisee. Sometimes that was a friendly social gathering because some Pharisees were curious about Jesus, at other times it was an attempt to trap Jesus in something.

So here we are, this morning, with some Pharisees warning Jesus not to go to Jerusalem because Herod wants to kill him. Are they friend or foe? Sincerely warning Jesus, or trying to intimidate him? In this situation, we don't know. And Luke doesn't tell us, probably because it doesn't really matter. Whatever their motives, what is clear is that Jesus responds to an outwardly friendly warning with some smack talk. Some Jesus-sass. And he responds with determination.

Whatever these Pharisees truly want, if they have access to Herod, Jesus has a message for them to deliver back to him. Or, if they are just dropping Herod's name to try to intimidate Jesus because *they* want him to get lost, Jesus' reply is all the same: I am undeterred. I'm on my way to Jerusalem to fulfill my mission. And neither Herod, nor you, can discourage me or throw me off course.

This encounter reminds me of Rosa Parks in the segregated south, who, while quietly disobeying the law by sitting on the *front* seat of the bus and refusing to move, was told by the driver, “The police can come and arrest you and throw you in jail, you know.” Was he friend or foe? Trying to help her, or intimidate her? It didn’t matter; she didn’t care. Her reply was, “They may do that.” Brilliant! She was undeterred. We could discuss the wants of the people and groups in *that* situation, however... back to our account in Luke:

What do the Pharisees want? If they are adversaries, they want Jesus to stop doing what he’s doing; they want him to be afraid and retreat to the shadows. If they are friends, they want to protect him; they like what he is saying and doing and they don’t want him to die. Either way, whatever their motives, they are trying to get Jesus to change his plans. Don’t go to Jerusalem.

What about Herod?

What Herod Wants

The Herod spoken of here is Herod Antipas, the Roman-appointed ruler of the Jewish region of Galilee. His father was Herod the Great, the one who, after Jesus was born, was so threatened at the news of this King of the Jews being born, massacred all the baby boys and toddlers two years old and under in and around Jerusalem. Nice family, huh?

After Herod the Great's death, his son, Herod Antipas, was appointed ruler over a portion of the region. This Herod is the one who killed John the Baptist, and upon hearing about Jesus amid reports that John was resurrected (that was the tabloid news of the day: John the Baptist has come back to life)... upon hearing all that, Herod is perplexed and more than a bit paranoid. He initially wants to see Jesus and have his curiosity satisfied, but later wishes rather to just do away with him.

So, what does Herod want? That one's easy: He wants to maintain his power.

And Jesus pays him a backhanded compliment, though somewhat insulting, by calling him, "that fox." What does Jesus mean by that? It's a bit ambiguous, but smart. Because in the Old Testament and in the Jewish mindset, foxes were deceitful and cunning and destructive—not good. But in the Greek culture and mindset, which the Romans largely inherited, the fox was seen as clever and canny. Wily, but in an admirable way. Good qualities, in their minds.

Whatever Jesus intends here, it's important to note that he does not call Herod "King" or "ruler." He calls him "that fox." It's Jesus' playful way of saying he isn't going to be afraid of Herod, or take him that seriously. And in this

somewhat dismissive response, Jesus says, “tell that fox...” that my mission is to heal and liberate, to restore and deliver, and... I’ll see you in Jerusalem.

Herod wants to maintain power. And Jesus is indifferent to that. Which leads to the big question:

What does *Jesus* want?

Two things. First, clearly, Jesus wants—or perhaps *wills* is a more accurate way to say it—to go to Jerusalem. And btw, as a footnote, Jerusalem plays a very important role in Luke’s writings (in his gospel and the book of Acts). Jerusalem is mentioned 90 times in Luke’s gospel and Acts, and only 49 times in the rest of the New Testament put together. Luke has done his homework, and has carefully researched Jewish history, so he knows how important Jerusalem is in the hearts and imaginations of the people of Israel. And, he knows that it has a less than stellar history when it comes to “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God” as the prophet Micah put it.

Jerusalem is seen as the place where prophets go to die, as we heard, and while it was the religious center of Judaism it was also seen (by the prophets) as the place of religious corruption and self-interest. So, Luke places Jesus very much in continuity with the Old Testament prophets, many of whom carried out their ministry in or around Jerusalem.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that the Old Testament prophets were like God's alarm clocks, set to wake God's people up from their spiritual slumber and their self-serving ways—to awaken them to God's mercy and justice, so they can participate in God's mission of being a light to the world. So, in keeping with that image of prophets as alarm clocks, Luke & Jesus are saying that Jerusalem's consistent response to the alarm clock is to take a sledge hammer to it each time it rang.

Even knowing, that, Jerusalem is where Jesus is determined to go. It might be overstating it to say that he *wants* to go there; but it is right to say that he is *determined* to go there. Maybe what we should say is that what Jesus *wants...* is to do God's will. That's the big want here. "Your will be done." It's what Jesus prayed in the garden, the night before his death. It all comes to fulfillment there.

Yet, after a salty interaction with the Pharisees and a salty word for Herod about his determination to go to Jerusalem, Jesus responds in a surprising way. Instead of letting them have it in an alarm clock sort of way, which he often did, or turning to his disciples to drop some insight in a teachable moment, like he often did, Jesus utters a lament over the city.

And this represents Jesus' second want: Jesus wants, *desires*, God's people to turn to him, to receive the consolation that God has to offer. He *wants* them

to want God. And because they haven't in the past, and apparently still don't, he laments.

Jesus is not *accusing* Jerusalem. He is *lamenting* Jerusalem. There's a big difference. Luke tells us, later, when Jesus finally sees Jerusalem after his triumphal entry, that "he wept over it" (Luke 19:41). His lament *here*, comes to fruition *there*, in a flow of tears, as he is sorrowing the stubbornness and unfaithfulness of Jerusalem.

A word about lament: Lament, Biblical lament, is an act of prayer, of crying out to God over struggle or loss or tragedy or sadness over something. Sometimes with tears, sometimes without, but all the time with a pouring out of our heart to God in our grief or pain or deep need of some kind. It's a pouring out of the heart in faith and trust that God hears, and that God can, and hopefully will, respond.

The prophet Jeremiah laments over Jerusalem after its destruction at the hands of the invading Babylonians—in the book of, well, Lamentations!

One third of the Psalms of the Old Testament are psalms of lament. You heard one of them read by Bethany, and it's one that I imagine Jesus using, perhaps, in his own prayers. That's the way people used Psalms; as tools for personal prayer, and sometimes corporate prayer and worship.

And by the way, if you are ever experiencing loss, sadness, confusion, depression, or when life just feels like one obstacle after another, something you can do is start reading psalms until you hear your voice. You will hear it eventually! The psalms speak for us in so many ways in our prayers to God. You can do the same when you're feeling on top of the world too! There are a lot of psalms of praise that speak for us in our times of joy and gratitude as well. Same with psalms of petition; and... psalms of lament. And these aren't only cries of grief and struggle, they are also expressions of hope! You heard that in Psalm 56. We cry out to God because we know that God can do something, even if things look pretty bleak in the present moment. So, lament is an act of faith and hope.

It's why people still go to the "Wailing Wall" today; which got its name from the Jewish practice of going to that site to mourn the destruction of the Jewish temple. Which Jesus foretold.

And so Jesus laments, and later weeps, for Jerusalem, for past failures to respond to God's mercy and grace, and because he knows what's coming in the days and years ahead for the city.

And in lamenting the city and speaking on behalf of God and God's desire to gather it's children, Jesus uses a tender image, of a mother hen gathering her

chicks under her wings. And I don't want it to be lost on us that Jesus uses a feminine image here to describe God's desires, and actions.

There are many feminine images of God throughout the Bible, and if our eyes are open while reading the Scriptures, we'll see them. We don't see them because we haven't been taught to look for them; but if we look for them, they are there.

For example, in Isaiah 49:15, when the people are complaining that the Lord has forgotten them, God says in reply, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? So shall I not forget you." And the beauty of that image is that, in the Hebrew language, the word "compassion" is the same word for "womb." It's used as a play on words in this passage from Isaiah. So when God says (in Hebrew), "I will have compassion on you," it can literally mean "I will womb you." Isn't that beautiful? In Hebrew, all words have a literal meaning and a figurative meaning. That makes it a poetic and imaginative language. So, any time you see a mother with her baby, that's a picture of God and God's heart of compassion.

And in the same fashion, Jesus uses a tender image of protection and nurture. And it tells us that God sees people, even wayward people, as children, longing to bring them into the fold. Jesus could have used a lot of different

images here. Jesus doesn't say "O Jerusalem, trying to gather you is like herding cats," or like roping steer. Jesus could've said, "How I would like to gather you like a shepherd gathers thier sheep," which would have been consistent with his message since that image is used in other places: Jesus is the good shepherd, we are his sheep. This image of a mother hen with her chicks, though, reflects even better God's heart of mercy, where we are seen as children in need of protection and nurture.

What is the main takeaway for us—in this swirl of wants and wills expressed here? The simple, main message is: nothing will deter Jesus in his mission of mercy and compassion. Nothing *political* (the Herod's of the world, or of our lives; or Pontius Pilate, to pull in last week's account), nor *bad religion* (Pharisee-like distortions of the gospel, or the corruption of people who presume to speak for God), nor will Jesus be deterred by *our* personal times of stubbornness or willfulness (when we are like Jerusalem in our times of wanting to go our own way). Jesus is persistent, determined, and compassionate. His persistence, determination and compassion will get him to Jerusalem, and through Holy Week. And we can rely on his persistence, determination, and compassion to get us through whatever we are facing in our lives, or in the world. Jesus is still on a mission of mercy. Which tells us, there is always hope.

With that in mind, here is what is perhaps the prophet Jeremiah's signature speech, contained in his lament over Jerusalem. Lamentations 3:19-23:

"I remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness, O God."

Great is Thy Faithfulness