

Second Sunday of Lent/March 17, 2019

Luke 13:31-35

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"The Journey Toward Jerusalem"

The season of Lent is a journey. It was originally devised as a time of preparation for new converts to the faith and for their baptism on Easter Sunday. Such a holy season in the church is mentioned as early as the second century by Irenaeus of Lyons, but as only a 2 or 3-day season of fasting. Some scholars suggest that a 40-day time of fasting and penitence existed in some places, since the days of the apostles. However, not until the Council of Nicea in 325 CE does a 40-day season of preparation become an official part of the church calendar.

It is based on the scriptural account of Jesus' 40 days of fasting and testing in the wilderness following his baptism. And it has over the years been characterized by disciplines of prayer, fasting, self-inspection, self-denial and sacrifice, almsgiving or giving to the poor, religious study and good works.

But it is also the time that our Lectionary Bible passages focus on those weeks in Jesus' life before he arrives in Jerusalem, the place of his trial, execution and death. The place of his passion. In these weeks, we hear about his focus, his *"setting his face to go toward Jerusalem"* as Luke tells us (9:51). And here today of his words of sorrow for the people of that city, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"*

In the coming weeks here in Lent, we will journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem. We will hear his teachings, learn his parables, and watch as he enters the great city itself on Palm Sunday. The gospels tell us that he knew what would happen to him there. That he tried to tell his disciples that he, the Son of Humanity, was to *"suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."*(Luke 9:22)

Was he clairvoyant? Able to see the future? Was it his plan? Did he set this all up because he believed it was God's will for him? Or was he simply reading the writing on the wall, acknowledging what happens to the prophets when they speak against the powers that be?

We can't really know his mind in those days, but we do know that he walked that journey with intention, with purpose. And while he certainly must have struggled with the emotions and sense of uncertainty as he did in the garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed for strength to continue on, we know that each step brought with it meaning and a greater understanding for himself, as well as for those around him, of who he was, and what he was about.

That is what Lent is supposed to be about for us as well. A time to look inside of ourselves. To look more closely, more honestly at our lives and take stock of who we are. To discover as we take each step through this season, what it means to be human, a being on a journey towards God.

In the Lenten devotional I have been reading, Bread and Wine - Readings for Lent and Easter, Edna Hong, American Lutheran poet, writer and translator, writes, *"The purpose of Lent*

is not to escape the conscience, but to create a healthy hatred of evil, a heartfelt contrition for sin, and a passionately felt need for grace."(p.22)

She goes on to say, "Forgiveness of sins is what the gospel is all about. Forgiveness of sins is what Christ's death upon the cross is all about. The purpose of Lent is to arouse. To arouse the sense of sin. To arouse a sense of guilt for sin. To arouse the humble contrition for the guilt of sin that makes forgiveness possible. To arouse the sense of gratitude for the forgiveness of sins. To arouse or to motivate the works of love and the work for justice that one does out of gratitude for the forgiveness of one's sins. To say it again - this time backward: There is no motivation for works of love without a sense of gratitude, no sense of gratitude without forgiveness, no forgiveness without contrition, no contrition without a sense of guilt, no sense of guilt without a sense of sin. In other words, a guilty, suffering spirit is more open to grace than an apathetic or smug soul. Therefore, an age without a sense of sin, in which people are not even sorry for not being sorry for their sins, is in rather a serious predicament." (p.24)

I'm not sure if I agree with Hong, that forgiveness of sins is what the gospel is all about or even that it is what Christ's death on the cross is all about. For me, the truth within the gospel has a more to do with the love of God poured upon us and expressed to us in the person of Jesus Christ the Beloved and the Spirit of freedom and empowerment we are given.

I do agree, as she eventually gets to, that a humble heart, an acknowledgement of our own *sin*, of our frailty, or inability to do what we know should be done, is important in this journey toward the sacred that we are on. I know that it is when I come to God in humility, that I most begin to see who I truly am, and who I am truly called to be.

This is why at First Church, we offer a number of opportunities during this season of Lent to explore together the journey of being fully human, fully who we are called to be, in our quest for God. Our opening theme of *grief* during our worship services is not meant to make us sad or burden us, but encourages us to reflect on an experience of life that we rarely talk about, and how God is present in every part, transforming us anew.

Yesterday, the discussion and prayer at the Circle of Presence, touched on deep waves of longing in our lives that keep us from being complacent with how things are and keep us moving toward our whole selves. For that is God's longing for us.

We live in an age, as Hong suggests, *without a sense of sin*. Where some of the most fundamental aspects of our social fabric are being torn apart. Where deceit, greed, self-interest, prejudice and outright hate and other forms of corrupt behavior seem to go unchecked and accepted as the new norm. This is a time when evil needs to be confronted, where hatred needs to be pointed at and named for what it is. And that we all need to step back and acknowledge our own part and role in all of it. To acknowledge both our personal and collective sin. Without this, we will not move forward.

So, I invite you, as we walk with Jesus on this Lenten journey, let us walk it with intention and with purpose. Let us walk it in humility and with open hearts, accepting our grief, desiring to become the new beings we are being called to be, beloved, and transformed by our God who is love. And let us walk it together. Amen.