

**“A LAMENT OF LOVE”**  
**Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 13:31-35**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**March 17, 2019**

During this season of Lent we are following Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ ministry leading up to his final, fateful days in Jerusalem. According to Luke, most of Jesus’ activity takes place in Galilee, which is the northernmost region of Israel. Then, in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter, Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51), which is located in the south of Israel and, of course, is the capital of the nation and the home of the temple.

Now, let’s suppose you get involved in a grass roots campaign to influence public opinion and policy on an issue you really care about. You might be seeking tougher laws on drunk driving, or school safety, or environmental protection, and your effort becomes a time-consuming job entailing lots of travel. You might start out by taking your campaign directly to the people. You would go out to places like Greenwich, Cheshire, New London, and New Haven. But eventually, you and your crusade would wind up where? In Hartford, the seat of our state government, where you can get the ear of the movers and shakers who enact legislation.

Well, this is what’s happening when we meet Jesus at this juncture in Luke’s narrative. Jesus has spent the early phase of his public ministry among ordinary people “out in the boonies.” Then, at some point he decides to take his message about the kingdom of God all the way to the top. He plans a last-ditch appeal to his people at the center of their national life. And so, Luke tells us, Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem; and now, in today’s Gospel reading, he is on his last journey to the holy city.

However, what we learn here in Luke 13 is that Jerusalem doesn’t promise to be a hospitable place. A warning comes from a group of Pharisees that Herod Antipas is out to kill Jesus. Herod Antipas is the ruler who represents Caesar and the Roman government in the region of Palestine. He is also the man who has John the Baptist beheaded. And now, along comes another Jewish prophet who stirs up the people and attracts a large following. A rumor is even circulating that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod Antipas intends to stamp out this uprising the same way he does the earlier one.

But notice, it’s not just the Roman authorities who pose a threat to Jesus. There is no guarantee that he will receive a warm reception in Jerusalem from his fellow Jews. Already the religious leaders there are openly critical of him. In today’s passage it’s fascinating that the Pharisees are pictured as friends, actually warning Jesus about the danger to his life. And we do know of Pharisees like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and Saul of Tarsus who become disciples of Jesus. But for the most part the religious leaders headquartered in Jerusalem are suspicious and increasingly hostile toward Jesus. And this is no great surprise. Read your history: the strongest opposition to truth always comes from those who think they already have a monopoly on the truth – in this case, the religious establishment.

So, Jesus is journeying toward Jerusalem, but Jerusalem doesn’t promise to be a friendly destination. Isn’t it ironic that great cities, blessed with renowned architecture and art and music, are also the breeding ground of violence? Today we wonder how Jerusalem, crowned by the

temple, could also be the slaughterhouse of prophets. But over the centuries this is exactly what Jerusalem becomes. The holy city is notorious for rejecting preachers who say things the people don't want to hear, or refuse to be the kind of leader the people want to follow. Jesus obviously knows this place's reputation. Looking out over the city at a distance, he cries, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!" (13:34a).

And yet, in spite of all these obstacles and deterrents, Jesus' face is still set toward Jerusalem. He's not distracted by the Pharisees; he's not intimidated by Herod Antipas; he doesn't shrink from the prophet-killers among his own people. Neither friend nor foe can alter his sure obedience to the will of God. Luke pictures him as single-minded, determined, and driven. For Jesus, it's Jerusalem or bust.

You and I have to wonder what motivates him. Why would a man make a journey that is certain to end in hostility, rejection, and death? You can't say that Jesus isn't properly warned, that he doesn't see the red flags lining the road to Jerusalem. Why is he so dead-set on going to a city that is bound to do him in? Is it just a sense of duty that drives him? Is it perhaps a martyr complex?

Well, Jesus tells us what drives him on to Jerusalem, but he does so indirectly. He does it in the form of a lament. A lament is an expression of sorrow that comes in the wake of a great loss or disappointment. A lament is our universal language for grief. You and I voice laments all the time whether we call them that or not. Over the past several days, I've found myself responding to current events with feelings and words of lament. I lament the fact that hatred and violence rear their ugly heads in peaceful places like Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and Christchurch, New Zealand. I lament the fact that I have Methodist brothers and sisters who do not feel welcome in our denomination. I lament the fact that people in our community may question whether the United Methodist Church really has "open hearts, open minds, and open doors." Those are my laments, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of you are reciting your own litany of laments today. Whatever our grievances may be, the pattern is always the same: loss and disappointment lead to lament.

The biblical story is full of losses and disappointments, so the Jewish and Christian Scriptures contain many laments. You may recall King David's famous lament after his rebellious son Absalom is killed in battle. Laments also appear frequently in the Hebrew psalms and fill the entire Book of Lamentations.

If you look closely, you'll see that today's Epistle lesson is a kind of lament. The apostle Paul warns the Philippians that "there are many whose lives make them enemies of Christ's death on the cross," whose "god is their bodily desires," who "think only of things that belong to this world" (Philippians 3:18b-19). Paul doesn't identify the group of people he is criticizing so harshly. They may be pagans who reject Christ altogether and live hedonistic lives, or they may be new converts to Christ who remain captive to their old ways of living. But either way, Paul obviously cares about these wayward people and grieves about their behavior. "I have told you this [story of disobedience] many times before," he says, "and now I repeat it with tears" (v. 18a). Do you hear the emotion in Paul's words? He writes "with tears"; what sounds like an attack is really a lament.

Today's Gospel lesson is also a lament, this time from the lips of Jesus himself. I quoted a part of it a moment ago: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!" But Jesus continues: "How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (13:34) Do you hear the sorrow in these words? Jesus is expressing sorrow for Jerusalem's checkered past, a story that begins with such great promise but is soon defiled by idolatry and immorality, corruption and oppression. But he's also expressing sorrow for Jerusalem's future, foretelling the destruction of the temple and his own destruction at the hands of his enemies.

In other words, when Jesus looks ahead to what awaits him in Jerusalem, he feels what psychologists call "anticipatory grief." It's the kind of grief you and I experience when we know ahead of time that we're going to lose someone or something we cherish very much. If you have ever had a loved one who died after a long terminal illness, you probably felt anticipatory grief. That is, you anticipated the loss, and you may have done a lot of your grieving before the person actually died. This is what Jesus is doing here: expressing sorrow for a relationship that is about to end in failure and rejection, and wishing to God it would turn out differently. He says it's like a mother hen trying to gather her brood and protect them under her wings, but her chicks choose to remain scattered, doing their own thing. It's like a parent who would go to hell and back to be reconciled to a defiant child, and the child would not.

Again, do you hear the sorrow in Jesus' words? And above all, do you hear the love? You see, this is not just any lament; it is a lament of love. And this is what drives Jesus on to Jerusalem – it is not just a sense of duty or a martyr complex; it is patient, persistent love.

I once read an interview of George McGovern, the late senator from South Dakota who ran for the presidency in 1972. The interview wasn't about politics; rather, it concerned McGovern's relationship with a daughter who would have been my age had she lived a full span of years. But she committed suicide in 1993, and her tragic death brought to an end a tormented life. George McGovern's daughter was a raging alcoholic. As much as anyone I have ever heard or read about, this woman was literally a slave to alcohol. She tried and tried to quit drinking. She went through a long line of rehab programs, some of the best in the country. And she successfully stopped drinking many times, but she could never stay stopped. She would remain sober for a while and then relapse; and the cycle repeated itself until she finally ended it the only way she knew how, by taking her own life.

This woman's existence was miserable, and she also made life miserable for her father, George McGovern. But what stood out in the interview was that this dad never gave up on his daughter. Oh, I'm sure the time came when he stopped rescuing her, when he refused to bail her out of yet another jam. Sometimes the most helpful thing we can do for a person who has a serious problem, but denies having it, is to let that person suffer the consequences of his or her behavior. But this is different from abandoning the person; this is an act of love. It's what we call "tough love," but it is still love. The remarkable thing about George McGovern is that he never stopped loving his daughter. There were periods in their relationship when he would call her every day from distant points in the country just to express his support and care. He never ceased believing in the possibility of her recovery. It's no wonder that, after her death, George McGovern expressed deep disappointment and sorrow. The interview I read was a kind of lament. This father would have done anything to help his daughter keep her sobriety, but she would not.

I'm guessing that some of you have voiced a lament very much like George McGovern's: "I would have gone to a counselor to try to save this marriage, but you would not." "I would have worked three jobs to pay for your college education, but you would not." "I would have taken you to the best doctors to find a treatment for your disease, but you would not." And let's admit it: sometimes we say things like this in pure anger; it's a form of accusation, because someone we love hasn't kept his or her part of the bargain. I would, but you would not!

As best I could tell, this note of accusation was completely absent from George McGovern's lament for his daughter. There was no trace of sour grapes or second-guessing. If he had been able to do it all over again, he would still have made any sacrifice to help his daughter get well. Looking back, he expressed sorrow for the tragic outcome, but he had no regrets about his own effort to produce a better outcome. I'm telling you, this was a lament of love.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" It occurs to me that what Jesus feels as he looks out on the holy city is a poignant image of what God must feel as God looks down on this rebellious planet. Perhaps you've heard simplistic people asking, "Why doesn't God do something about evil in the world? God has all this power. Why doesn't God just wipe out all the evil people on earth – the drug lords, the mass murderers, the mad dictators? Well, I'll tell you why God doesn't. It's because those who are rebelling against God are God's sons and daughters. They are acting like enemies; but at a deeper level, they are God's beloved children. Many of us understand this depth of love and loyalty from our own experience. Even though someone is doing something to us that is very painful and destructive, when we're kin to these folks and really love them and don't want them to be destroyed, then atom bombs are not the best way to resolve the conflict. And if we feel this way, how much more so does God.

When Jesus looks out over the holy city, he doesn't like what Jerusalem has been doing and what it's about to do to him, but he continues to love Jerusalem. This is not a lament of angry accusation; it is a lament of love – a love that is patient and persistent, always inviting, always pleading; a love that will not let us go.

Friends, when you and I are tempted to write someone off as hopelessly corrupt and beyond redemption, or even when we disagree with someone so strongly on a sensitive issue that we view that person as an enemy, we need to be reminded of Jesus' love for Jerusalem and God's love for each of us. Jerusalem is about to reject Jesus, but Jesus doesn't reject Jerusalem. And this is the best picture I know of the anguish of God, of what God must feel as God looks down on a world which God wants to be joyful and peaceful. You can almost hear God say, "How I wanted to love you, to be close to you, and you wouldn't let me."

I wonder this morning if God is lamenting a broken relationship with any of us? Are you and I living at odds with our heavenly Father, or perhaps just keeping our distance from him? The good news is, God hasn't given up on any of us. God would embrace us if we would allow God to do so.

I wonder, does anyone here need a hug?