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Second Sunday of Lent
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Lectionary Year C:
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35
Psalm 27

The Lord who waits

The Pharisees in the New Testament get used as a kind of generic cover for religious hypocrisy and short-sightedness. We don't know a whole lot about this group called the Pharisees historically, except that they were careful and studious reader of the Torah, and held a belief in bodily resurrection. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, however, they come in for scathing criticism, as a foil for Jesus and the disciples.

These same Pharisees are in conversation with Jesus when today's gospel, from St. Luke, begins. In this case, however, it may even be that they are trying to protect Jesus—or at least acting like they're trying to protect Jesus. They urge him to avoid the dangerous environment of the city, in which he was under threat, and to escape, in order to protect himself from harm. "Get away from here," they say to him. Herod is going to kill you if he gets his hands on you.

With typical gospel ambiguity we can't really tell whether these particular Pharisees are truly concerned with Jesus' well-being, or if they just wish he'd leave and so are using Herod as the "bad cop" of the situation, or if they are mocking him, or perhaps some combination. Perhaps they don't even really know what they should make of Jesus, deep in their heart of hearts. He's enigmatic. He is like them—a student of Scripture, a believer in resurrection—yet somehow so very different. There is tension and rivalry between Pharisees, on the one hand, and Jesus and his followers on the other. They are both very similar and very different, and that brings on friction.

In this sense, the Pharisees are representatives of the city of Jerusalem as a whole. Jerusalem, that city of David, the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, the center of the promised land: just as the Pharisees will eventually have to make a personal decision about Jesus, the city will, too. Jerusalem is the site of some of his work, including the provocations in the Temple which likely led directly to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Just as Jesus addresses the Pharisees as a group in other places in the gospels, in today's passage he addresses Jerusalem, the city, almost as if it is a character in the story itself. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he cries, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" And then this sad, personal lament: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

He wanted to gather them. But they would not. This repeated rejection of the Messiah by his people is a prominent theme in the gospel of Luke, but, in this passage, one hears what sounds like the almost personal agony for him. The very families of the children of Abraham, who had kept alive the worship of God, in spite of nearly insurmountable obstacles, in spite of terrible persecution, for generations, are not able to recognize the saving God in their midst. They don't see that the fulfillment of God's promise walks among them. And it sounds like it breaks Jesus' heart.

The contrast between the hope and joy that are described in the beginning of Jesus' life and the resistance and rejection that come at the end is stark and painful. The gospel of Luke begins in Jerusalem, with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, celebrating their own child's birth and looking forward to the coming of the Messiah with excitement and jubilation. And the earthly ministry of Jesus would end there, at a mock trial, while the crowd chants "Crucify, crucify him!"

The irony, of course, is that the Pharisees are rejecting their own hope; that is, the hope that was specifically for them; the hope that had been promised to them through a covenant that had not been made with anyone else. But the jubilant expectations from Zechariah and Elizabeth in Jerusalem at the beginning of the gospel aren't realized; the plot takes a tragic turn as we approach the day of Jesus' trial and the machinery of death grinds on to its final stopping point.

The Pharisees in the New Testament may be read as a kind of generic representation for religious hypocrisy and short-sightedness. But if so, that depiction should feel a little too close to home. That's because we, the Church, the New Israel, fall into the same errors, only now more grievous, rather than less, with the witness of the apostles and their successors, having heard the good news, the gospel of God.

The tragedy of Israel's rejection of Jesus in the first century then becomes mirrored by the Church's own rejection of him, throughout the ages, in the various ways that we don't live up to the new life we have been called to, the way that we are not faithful to the covenant that has been made with us. The error of Israel in the first century is an error repeated by Christians ever since, by our religious forebears and, I imagine, by each one of us. How often have we not deserved the name "Christian"? How often have our own sins—our own turnings away from Christ—hurt others deeply?

This story of the Pharisees then, as described in Luke, can be seen as a foreshadowing of the stories of Christians throughout the ages, including this age of ours. When we read in the gospels about Jerusalem turning from affection for Jesus, to indifference, and then to hate, until its final violent end, we watch what is a possibility for all of us. Indifference to Jesus. You see that everywhere, inside churches as well as outside of them. Indifference to the covenant. Hypocrisy and short-sightedness.

It could be that the heartbreaking tone of Jesus' address to Jerusalem in today's gospel is the voice of one who knows what's going to happen, who can see it written clearly—what is going to happen not only to him, but also to them and, by extension, to us. Paul reminds us that our citizenship is in heaven, but we remain with minds set on earthly things, even enemies of the cross of Christ. Like a mother hen, Jesus longed to gather his children, but they would not come. We would not come. So often, we still don't. He waits and waits, but still we don't come.

But it is our hope, our faith, that these denials of Christ aren't the end. It is the promise Christ has made that, through him, broken lives can be healed; indifference can be overcome; dry bones can live; sins can be forgiven, because Jesus is Lord of it all. Acknowledged or unacknowledged, he is the Lord, whose glory is always to have mercy, and he waits.

The story of his work in the world, and in each one of us, hasn't ended yet. So we are called to approach the throne of God even in our present state, and there to be forgiven, by grace, for our own rejections of Christ, for the New Israel's unfaithfulness to the new covenant. For there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance. We Pharisees live by grace, and we are saved by grace, and God's grace alone.

The Pharisees said to Jesus in today's gospel, "Get away from here." Go away. Be he wouldn't go. Even if the Pharisees wouldn't listen, even if Jerusalem would be deadly, even if waiting would mean his death, he doesn't leave. Wherever he is needed, Jesus will stay. He is Lord. And he is waiting for us.