

**SERMON**  
**“Lent: A Time of Lamentation”**  
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**March 7, 2010**  
**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

Philippians 3: 17-4:1

**Luke 13: 31-35**

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” 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. 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.’ 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! 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.””

## SERMON

As Br'er Rabbit would have put it, "Lent, it is a crying place." It is the place where the heart sings great lamentation over what once was, but is not any more. It is also the place where **the soul grieves over what could have been, if only.**

What could have been for Jerusalem according to Jesus? The children of Jerusalem could have been gathered together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing. How I love the image of Jesus as a mother hen gathering us safely under her wings! How I like the idea of being able to return to the warmth and protection of my mother's love—but this is no more. Those days have passed me by. For Jerusalem this could have been—if it weren't for their stoning of prophets.

Today's story starts with Jesus responding to the Pharisees' warning. The Pharisees, for a change, are well intentioned. They try to warn Jesus to turn away from his journey to Jerusalem, for Herod is out to kill him. Jesus brushes off their warning then moves his conversation with the Pharisees to the topic of the fate of "God's house," the beloved temple of Jerusalem, the center of Israel's faith.

When King Herod is mentioned, Jesus speaks with contempt about the "old fox." When he mentions Jerusalem, he expresses great sorrow. He moves into poetic, classical lamentation, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he laments. Later, we are told in Chapter 19 verse 41, as he sees the city he weeps over it. For the political power mongers, Herod, Jesus shows no compassion. To the devout religious leaders he speaks of Jerusalem from a heart racked with pain. Today he speaks to those who work at worshipping and serving God. He speaks to us.

It might be easier this morning if Jesus had used his last days to spend more time attacking King Herod, to criticize the government and the national economy. No! His last words of lamentation are for us. With the cross not far away, for this is the third Sunday of Lent—just

two more Sundays to go—he laments for God’s very own; the faithful who are unfaithful, for Israel, for the Church, and for us.

We are the ones called to be light in a dark world and salt to an otherwise bland existence. “Jerusalem, O Jerusalem” spiritual center of God’s people from which hope and peace was to come. You have instead become known as the city who stones the prophets God sends to you.

I have heard many a Christian ask, “Will Muslims be saved?” Why is it that Christians are so concerned over whether to be in lamentation over the salvation of the Muslims? When Christ is in a season of lamentation, it’s God’s own for which he laments. He laments over what could have been—if we had been light to the world and the spice that makes life full.

This is the third lesson of Lent. First comes our time in the wild determining the temptations to which we surrender. The second lesson involves repentance, a turning away from what tempts us, to mature in our faith. The third lesson stands us in front of those big, sad Arabic eyes, looking at us and weeping over what could have been, if only we had taken our faith a little more seriously. I’d rather be back in the wild with the devil. How about you?

What are your regrets? What are the times when prophets came and you stoned them? You silenced them? Regrets are those deep down things we’d rather just forget. They feel heavier than mere sin. There are the things in our lives that our souls never stop lamenting over. When I pondered what regrets I could offer up as an example, I realized that regrets, the places and times over which my **soul grieves about what could have been, if only**—are personal stories most of us can only tell the closest of friends, our therapist, our minister—the people we trust to keep strict confidences. Some personal regret stories over choices we have made that we

so wish we hadn't, we may have even decided are best left untold. Usually, they are best told, because in the telling, there is healing.

Often, within those stories, there are voices warning us to not go there to which we paid no heed. We silenced the prophet who came in human form or as voices within our heads, because we wanted to go our own way instead of the way of God—or **because no one ever taught us how to listen for God.**

The first half of verse 35 of today's gospel reading is troublesome. "See, your house is left to you." In the translator's attempts to make the sentence read in a way that jives with our English construct, some of the sentence's rich meaning is compromised. The *New Revised Standard* translation of the Bible, which I just spoke, leaves out the word usually translated "desolate or forsaken." The *Old Revised Standard Version* reads, "Behold, your house is forsaken." It in turn leaves out the word usually translated, "left to you." The *New International Version* translation of the Bible wins out in giving us the most accurate translation, "Look, your house is left to you desolate."

In other words, when we silence the true prophets, the internal or external voice sent by God who wants to warn us about the consequences of our choices, our soul, our *nepish*, the totality of our being...our house will be left desolate...empty. Now, in the multifaceted nature of this ancient literature passed down to us, the passage also means when our house, our soul's health, is left to us—when we try to make decisions or discernments without God in the picture—we miss the chance to know soulfulness.

Maybe a better interpretation would be, "Look, your house—left to you—will be desolate."

Now, in the many facets of scripture, the word “house” can easily be applied to us. In 1st Corinthians 3: 16 Paul says, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple [God’s house] and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? And again in Chapter 6 verse 19, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that **you** are not your own?”

The word translated “house”, can also be applied to the place to which we go to pray to God, the house of prayer, the Jewish temple of Jerusalem, or our church. This passage of scripture begs us to also ask, “What are our regrets? What are the times when prophets came and we stoned them? When we, the church, silenced them?”

Paul’s letter to the Christian in Philippi, Macedonia reeks with affection. Actually it is the most cordial of all his letters. The First Church of Philippi, the first church Paul established on European soil, was dear to his heart. In the verses of this epistle read today, Paul proclaims his great love for the Christians at Philippi, after boldly instructing them to imitate him as an example. “Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us.”

Now, I will not be so bold as to tell you that I am a prophet to whom you must listen—and I will never tell you to imitate me. How could someone with as many regrets as I do such a thing?

I can only tell my story about how I feel God is leading me to lead you. Then you can tell me whether you discern it to be an external voice from God. I think this is the way it is for all of us.

At the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, after you complete 2 years of confirmation-type training, you can join their church. In the first year of study you become

biblically literate. During the second year, you map out your spiritual disciplines that will help you maintain a close relationship with God. Then during the third year, once you have joined the church, you are expected to determine your call—to decide to whom God wishes to send you. On the Sunday on which you feel fairly certain that you know what that is, you stand up in church and announce your call. If there are others who have felt a similar call, they stand and with them you form a mission group and get busy making your call reality. If no one stands—you figure maybe you heard God wrong, and start listening for God some more.

I felt called before I ever came to you to help a congregation implement a spiritual development program. I went through a very spiritually dry period after leaving Minneapolis and going to Norman, Oklahoma. **Maybe this was due to the fact that I was making too many decisions without God's help.** I don't know. I just know God seemed absent, and I hungered for God's presence. Through a series of unbelievable coincidences I was lead to a minister in Oklahoma City who trained spiritual directors. Once I had completed this course, I felt certain I was called to help a congregation implement a spiritual development program and experience the life-changing presence of God. Thank God some of you have stood up to participate in this ministry, and have given me a chance to help you learn how to listen for God.

At the beginning of spiritual development every week, I ask, "So what has God been up to in your life since last we meet? What has been your experience of God this last week?" It takes a while to take hold. At first, no one has much to report, but with time, the prophet's voice becomes audible. O, St. John's, St. John's Chapel how I yearn to teach you all how to pay better attention to your God. Why are so many of you unwilling?

Now I have another call that is tugging at my heart strings. From the experience of being called to start a Bread for the World chapter in Springfield, to the suggestion of growing a

community garden in our back yard, to the sly way God slipped in a homeless program, I think I hear God calling this congregation to a more comprehensive ministry focused on the hungry and homeless. Rhonda Glaser, Melissa Burnett and I are determined to start a community garden here at St. John's this summer. We can only hope and pray that some will stand to join us. What do you say?

Do you have a better idea on how we are going to get out of this here crying place—to let the light of Easter shine through? For our scripture tells us that Jesus tell us that we will not see him again until we can say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of Lord.” Until the day when we can welcome the prophetic proclamation of... **What can be, if only!**