

WPC
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Lament Over Jerusalem
Genesis 15:1-6; Luke 13:31-35

In the 1990 comedy film *Crazy People*, Dudley Moore plays the part of Emory Leeson, an advertising executive who comes up with an outrageous idea: telling the truth. “Let’s face it,” Emory tells a coworker, “you and I lie for a living.” Daring to buck this trend, Emory begins to compose ruthlessly honest ads. Instead of deceiving people into believing that some product will make them happier, sexier or richer, he says things like “Volvos: they’re boxy, but they’re safe” or “United Airlines: most of our passengers get there alive.”

Predictably, Emory’s new commitment to tell the truth lands him in trouble. He’s sent off to a psychiatric hospital to restore his “sanity.” But while he’s locked up, his agency accidentally releases his ads to the public, and the results are astounding. The public is so shocked, amazed, and delighted by hearing the unvarnished truth for once that sales skyrocket.

We all hunger for the truth. In today’s Gospel Jesus is depicted as a true prophet of Israel who tells the truth no matter how badly it hurts to hear

the truth. Jesus overlooks the city of Jerusalem and laments at its infidelity because he cares so much for its inhabitants.

Luke's Gospel begins and ends in the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah learns in the temple that he and Elizabeth will have a child. Mary and Joseph bring their own child there when the time comes. Simeon and Anna deliver their prophecies there, and Jesus returns when he's 12 years old to take his place among the teachers of Israel.

Jerusalem is also the place where Jesus is betrayed, crucified, and killed. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, "Nothing that happens in Jerusalem is insignificant. When Jerusalem obeys God, the world spins peacefully on its axis. When Jerusalem ignores God, the whole planet wobbles."¹

The passage begins with the Pharisees coming to warn Jesus that King Herod wants to kill Jesus. That's one thing I like about the Pharisees: they may often disagree with Jesus, but they continually interact with him. Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, the one who had John the Baptist beheaded, had heard about Jesus from reports saying that he was John resurrected. Herod had originally wanted to see Jesus because he was perplexed and curious (Luke 9:7-9). Now Herod simply wants to be done with these disturbing prophets by killing Jesus as well.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, 2/25/86, p. 201.

Jesus' response to Herod as "that fox" is unclear in its meaning. In the Old Testament the fox is destructive; in Greek literature, clever (Craddock, p. 173). In either case, Jesus is neither intimidated nor deterred by the threat, because he knows God has put him on the road he's on.

Then Jesus weeps over 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." I'd like to make three reflections on this lament.

First, notice that Jesus uses a female imagery to describe himself. He compares himself to a hen, not a rooster. It's a good reminder that God is beyond male and female. The words we use to describe God can never do so adequately because God is so much bigger than we can even imagine. So we use as much metaphor as we can in describing what God is like: God is like a Father, God is like a mother hen, God is the Rock of my salvation. We should never try to limit our description of God.

Second, notice that a hen trying to defend her chicks against a fox does so at the cost of her life. Taylor says, "Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. Where is the biblical precedent for that? What about the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea's

stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. No wonder some of the chicks decided to go with the fox.

But a hen is what Jesus chooses, which -- if you think about it --is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first."² Which is eventually what ends up happening.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, 2/25/86, p. 201.

Third, this passage shows us that Jesus still loves Jerusalem and wants to save the city in spite of its infidelity. The early Christians saw that love and decided to give their lives to following Jesus in spite of incredible danger from the Roman Empire. Many gave their lives instead of giving up their faith. The same thing continues to happen today.

In February 2001, John Oros spoke to an audience at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary about his experience as a church leader in Romania during the Communist era:

"During communism, many of us preached and people came at the end of a service, and they said, 'I have decided to become a Christian.'

We told them, 'It is good that you want to become a Christian, but we would like to tell you that there is a price to be paid. Why don't you reconsider what you want to do, because many things can happen to you. You can lose, and you can lose big.'

A high percentage of these people chose to take part in a three-month catechism class. At the end of this period, many participants declared their desire to be baptized. Typically, I would respond, 'It is really nice that you want to become a Christian, but when you give your testimony there will be informers here who will jot down your name. Tomorrow the problems will

start. Count the cost. Christianity is not easy. It's not cheap. You can be demoted. You can lose your job. You can lose your friends. You can lose your neighbors. You can lose your kids who are climbing the social ladder. You can lose even your life.'

Let me tell you my joy when we looked into their eyes, and their eyes were in tears, and they told us, 'If I lose everything but my personal relationship with my Lord Jesus Christ, it is still worth it.' "³

God tells us the truth. Sometimes, the truth is exciting, as when God told Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky. Sometimes, the truth is jarring, as when Jesus tells us that to follow him we need to take up our cross, or when Jesus laments over Jerusalem for their infidelity. But the good news is that God tells us the truth because he loves us. In weeping over Jerusalem, Jesus expresses his love for the city and for its people and shares his desire to gather its children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

May we always be open to hearing God's truth in our lives. Amen.

³ Sermon Illustrations for February 28, 2010 (Lent 2)