

**TO BEHOLD THE BEAUTY OF THE LORD**  
**PSALM 27; LUKE 13:31-35**

Pultizer Prize winning novelist John Updike said that he always wrote with the last sentence in mind. Knowing how the story would end helped Updike know what to say in the beginning and at each and every stop along the way.

Luke's Gospel points to its end from the beginning, although it is not always clear what Jesus knows and when he knows it. All Jesus seems to know in the beginning is that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him and that he has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free (it is almost as demanding as serving as a deacon in a Presbyterian Church). Later, he learns that, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (and, at this point in history, there was no Board of Pensions).

Now that Jesus is referring to himself as Son the Man, it seems safe to say that he is clearer than ever about the gravity of his mission. God has called him to preach truth to power, to feed hungry men, women and children, to heal the sick and to bind up the broken-hearted, but now---now---it appears that God is calling him to suffer unto death.

Jesus understands himself as a prophet, and, as he observes in Luke's Gospel, "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." He may feel safe outside of the city limits, but the problem at this stage in Israel's history is that Jerusalem is everywhere. Thus Jesus laments: "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.'" Palm Sunday. Yes. Passion/Palm Sunday.

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*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 28, 2010*

Wait a minute! This is only the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent. There is much, much more wilderness to put behind us. Why is the Lectionary rushing us? This past Sunday, Jesus is barely dry following his baptism when is tempted by the devil. Now he faces plots against his life that are being mounted by Herod Antipas, Son of Herod the Great, whose power was contingent on being recognized by Rome. Jesus stayed away from Sepphoris and Tiberias, places that recognized Herod and looked to Romanize Galilee. Bullied by Rome and ignored by Jesus, Herod lashes out at the poor, the broken-hearted, the oppressed and the one who came to serve them, and maybe---just maybe---Jesus is afraid, like children who are afraid of the dark.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

Remember how the sermon series is structured this Lent. We are following Jesus’ story as it is told in Luke’s Gospel. Then we are setting the Gospel into conversation with the Psalm by asking how this collection of biblical poetry and wisdom literature speaks to the situation in which Jesus finds himself. The Hebrew Scriptures are only the Scriptures that Jesus knows. The Psalms are prayers that Jesus prays; the Psalms are songs that Jesus sings.

“When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh---my adversaries and my foes---they shall stumble and fall.”

The Pharisees are clear that Herod is looking to crucify Jesus, and Jesus thinks that Herod should jump in a hole. Jesus’ message to Herod is loud and clear: “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.’” Foxes have holes. Birds of the air have nests, and Jesus has work to do, work that is complete only in resurrection.

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Wonder what goes through Jesus' mind? "Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear." Surely, Jesus knows that God is with him. God's rod and staff comfort him. Maybe he is bold to pray: "Though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident." Jesus knows that God will resurrect him, at which point his work on earth will be complete, and he will reign in heaven: "One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

Is it just me? Or do you find it ironic that the Lectionary readings for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent were filled with references to dwelling places, and now the Lectionary readings for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent concern themselves with houses?

To live in the house of the Lord is the one thing that the psalmist seeks. To gather Jerusalem in one place, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, is Jesus' desire, but Jerusalem is disobedient, like you and I are disobedient, and Jesus calls us to consider the consequences of our actions and inaction by saying: "See, your house is left to you." The house in which Jesus will live is more faithful and less contentious than the one in which he lives now.

Does Jesus ask the God that he knows as Mother and Father, less as rooster and more as hen, for the same thing that the Psalmist asks? "One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in God's temple." See. Behold. Beauty. Behold the beauty of the Lord. Behold the beauty of the Lord as an act of worship. Behold the beauty of the Lord in an effort to gain perspective on the silliness over which human beings quibble. Behold the beauty of the Lord, because God's grace in Jesus Christ is beautiful, and this beauty helps us to appreciate the beauty in all things that God created, which is to say everybody and everything.

There is beauty in simplicity, in the simple gifts that God bestows on us. There is beauty, which is to say further evidence of God's grace in the laughter and music of children who sing, "Tis a gift to be

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simple. Tis a gift to be free. Tis a gift to come down where you ought to be, and when we find ourselves in the place just right, it will be in the valley of love and delight. When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn will be our delight, til by turning, turning we come round right."

Lent is a time for turning. It is a time for repentance, and while taking on or giving up is not necessarily delightful, the one who motivates us to turn, take on or give up delights in us, and in so doing, causes us to delight in God. Watch a mother hen gather her brood, and in so doing, you will catch a glimpse of God.

Please note that gifts do not always feel like gifts. When Jesus came down where he ought to be, he was abused, first verbally and then physically, and on at least one occasion, he prays that his cup be taken from him.

The phrase in "Simple Gifts" that seems most appropriate here is "when we find ourselves in the place just right, it will be in the valley of love and delight." Is it just me? Or do we prefer mountains to valleys (and in so doing, fail to appreciate the beauty of the valleys)? Maybe this is why so many of us are afraid of valleys. Maybe this is why we, as the church, the body of Christ, are reluctant to observe Lent? And yet if we live simply and faithfully, we may find that life in the valley may be marked by love and delight.

Jesus knows this, and he knows Psalms to pray when he finds himself on the verge of pride or despair: "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! 'Come,' my heart says, 'seek God's face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek."

The Lord's face is the end of the story for the psalmist; it is the end of the story for the Christ. Everything that Jesus says and everything that Jesus does is said and done with Jerusalem in front of him, and as we set our faces toward Jerusalem this Lent, let us be guided by love, God's wondrous love,

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love that is light and salvation and love that helps us to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. There are many miles to go before we arrive in Jerusalem, and there are even more miles to go before we pass through the valley of shadow of death and celebrate Easter. So be patient: “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” To the blessed and only Sovereign, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

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