

## **Second Sunday in Lent**

Imagine this scene with me, you are gathered in a home, really the courtyard of a home, in the second century Roman Empire, somewhere in what is today Turkey, then called Asia Minor. The house is not likely a permanent residence for anyone, but the wealthy and Christian owner of the home has donated its use for this purpose and for Sunday worship. It was common for wealthy folks to own multiple homes. It is effectively a church, but outwardly it is a house still.

On the raised platform on the one end, where normally the meal would be taken, sits a man, a catechist, your teacher. He is there to teach you and prepare you for your baptism in a few weeks. You are one of the catechumens, soon to be baptized, and this class is part of introducing you to the mysteries of the Church. You have attended proclamation services for some time but, when it came time to celebrate the Eucharist, you were always asked to leave. That mystery is only for the baptized. You are not allowed even to watch the Eucharist being celebrated. As part of your preparation for baptism you have spent time learning the songs which are sung at the Eucharist and having them explained to you. Now you are listening to what is for all intents and purposes a lecture. You have been in a process leading up to this day. Only recently you were enrolled in the list of catechumens. Prior to that, the congregation put you through something called the “scrutinies.” They sent members of the fellowship around to your neighbors to ask questions about your character, your manner of life, what sort of a person you were. Today we would call it a back ground check. They take this very seriously.

What is the lesson this week? Last time we heard about the victory which Christ won over Satan, the head of all the evil spirits that inhabit this world, and there are many of those. You shudder at the thought and memory of your encounters with them. Perhaps you left that session feeling a little buoyant; after all, to be on the winning side is a good thing. To see one’s champion prevail, like your country’s athletes winning the laurel wreath at the Olympic Games, fills one with pride and joy.

But today’s lesson is not nearly so upbeat. The catechist is talking about a cross, the Lord’ Jesus’ cross, yes, but now it is a cross which applies to me and my life as well. He speaks of hard realities. Christ’s victory does not mean that we will win every encounter with the evil one. In fact, he tells us that brothers and sisters in Christ have paid for this confession with their very lives. 11 of the 12 witnesses of Christ were martyred. Even today, capricious governors can finger the Christians as a threat and declare open season on them. Recently in the Province of Phrygia there was an earthquake and the people rioted, demanding that the Christians be delivered up to them to appease angry gods. Because the emperor has declared ours an illicit religion, there was no legal recourse and scores died that day.

Why is he telling us these things? Does he want to discourage us? Did he really think that we had offered ourselves up because we thought this would be easy? Did he really think that we did not know the sacrifices that might be asked of us?

Now I see, he does not really discourage us, but I suppose we need to hear this too, lest someone think it is easy. But we are privileged to suffer with Christ. What a glory, the work of God's kingdom goes on through us, in every way, even in my suffering.

How is this different from our catechesis today? Have we played the crowd in the way we have brought in Christians to our fellowship? Has the marketplace of Christian ideas which dominates in North America meant that we could not be more rigorous than the Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian down the street so we have collectively made being a Christian easy, a religion which asks very little of us. If we had not done so, someone would have done it and then their parking lot would have been full when ours was empty.

But now all the parking lots are empty. The few success stories among Christian churches are parasites, feeding on the rest of the body. Rick Warren has not gathered new converts for the most part. The masses who stream into his parking lot are refugees from other Christian congregations. No one really penetrates the growing numbers of people who have checked out of religion. If you are going to grow, you will appeal to a shrinking demographic of people who are already Christian but perhaps open to affiliating at another church because they are a little dissatisfied the preacher or the program where they are currently a member but not likely worshipping. The booming churches promise financial wealth or some blessing to those who attend (I think of Joel Osteen and other "success" stories but also the many who package familial or personal mental health as Christianity.)

Could a church today offer the catechesis demanded by our texts today, the Lord's call to every human being to take up a cross, an instrument of barbarous torture, and follow him? Would your district president and the staff in the district office be supportive? Would your fellow Christians in town be supportive or would they just open their doors to your members who heard a little and walked away, ears itching for something a little more palatable and a little more comfortable?

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*We have no strength...Seems to contradict our culture, but if we are honest with ourselves, it makes a certain amount of sense. Is not our human strength really a passing thing? Our elderly members will be able to attest to this for us. I remember my grandfather complaining that he simply had no "power" any more. Being a stout Iowa farmer, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he had relied upon his physical strength and he had plenty of that. But in his 80's it was gone. He missed it.*

*How will we help our people understand that they have no strength? Have you ever tried not to think about something? As soon as you try, you are thinking about it again! It is a trap of sorts. We really are not in control of our minds as much as we would like to think we are. They often just run with us. Is that a form of weakness? Our emotions run away with us, our desires, and our minds even fail us. And yet, we so want to believe that we have strength that these words can sound alien to us.*

*We ask God defend us from the evil thoughts that assault and hurt our soul –the juxtaposition of the physical act “assault and hurt” beside the intangible soul is interesting. What are those thoughts? Is it a repetition of the temptation theme? Is it something more? Temptation is usually something that happens from outside the person. Satan tempts us, but we can actually be pretty self-destructive all by ourselves. “Do not sin in your anger” Evil thoughts/emotions really do assault us, weigh us down and often drive us to say and do things which we later regret deeply. We can have a murderous tongue, driven by the mind under assault by wicked/perverse thoughts. Jesus said that the person who calls his neighbor a fool is a murderer. James compares it to the rudder that steers a ship, perhaps on the destructive shoals. There are many assaults upon the soul.*

*We wonder if one of the great assaults we perpetrate on ourselves is the doubting which we have in the face of God’s promises. We can accuse ourselves when God has forgiven. We can doubt God’s promised presence and that leads to great fear. We can doubt the promise of God’s work through his Church and the Sacraments for us, and that means we come to worship sour and become critics and not the eager recipients of what God has promised us there.*

*This can get a little frightening. The old say says that one should be careful of what one prays, God might just let you have it. In the Jeremiah text the author asserts that God saves the city by destroying it. The sins of the people were far more destructive than the Babylonians with all their armies and their battering rams. The soul of the nation was in real danger of being destroyed.*

*This prayer also asks us to think carefully about what we say. When we pray and use the term “God’s mighty power” what do our people think of? Do they think of earthquakes and hurricanes? Incredibly powerful events, but are they divine? This speaks of God’s mighty power protecting us, not destroying us. How does that mighty power protect and defend us? We speak of an “act of God” and usually mean something that is pretty negative. Your insurance policy thinks of “acts of God” that way. When I think of him defending me, what do I think of? Do I think of the beauty of a natural event? A glorious sunrise? Do I notice that the lightning does not strike my house or am I so used to that I don’t even notice it anymore? Does God protect us simply by finding a moment to give us a measure of peace as we see something beautiful?*

*It is a tough sell, but does God’s mighty power in an earthquake perhaps also serve to protect and save us? Does God exercise that mighty power through the simple gift of faith? Does the power of God express through the inexplicable fact that today 2 billion people believe and are in a relationship with Jesus called Christian faith in which he promises their eternal life and salvation?*

*If God really defends us from assaults of our own thoughts which hurt the soul, what does that look like? Is it mind control? Does God simply keep us from going some places? Does he keep us from seeing that scantily clad model that tempts us to lustful thoughts? Hence would we most likely never even notice if God answers this prayer because we never see the assault in the first place? Do we see the hand of God in giving us healthy/good things to think about? Do we see the hand of Satan in the public scorn that gets heaped upon such things?*

## **Readings**

Jeremiah 26:8-15

*In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: <sup>2</sup> “Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD’s house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word. <sup>3</sup> It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds. <sup>4</sup> You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, <sup>5</sup> and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, <sup>6</sup> then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.’”*

<sup>7</sup> *The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the LORD. <sup>8</sup> And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, “You shall die! <sup>9</sup> Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant?’” And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.*

<sup>10</sup> *When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king’s house to the house of the LORD and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the LORD.*

<sup>11</sup> *Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, “This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.”*

<sup>12</sup> *Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, “The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. <sup>13</sup> Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you. <sup>14</sup> But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. <sup>15</sup> Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.”*

<sup>16</sup> Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God.” <sup>17</sup> And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, <sup>18</sup> “Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah: ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts,

“‘Zion shall be plowed as a field;  
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,  
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.’

<sup>19</sup> Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves.”

<sup>20</sup> There was another man who prophesied in the name of the LORD, Uriah the son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words like those of Jeremiah. <sup>21</sup> And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death. But when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt. <sup>22</sup> Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men, Elnathan the son of Achbor and others with him, <sup>23</sup> and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people.

<sup>24</sup> But the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so that he was not given over to the people to be put to death.

*This pericope from Jeremiah demands that we look at the context. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet of Judah and with good reason. This is a ministry that has had some seriously significant problems. I have had a few voters meetings get contentious, but Jeremiah has his congregation rioting and quite literally demanding his head! It is time for the District President to intervene.*

*In the first part of this chapter Jeremiah is given a clear message of prophetic doom to proclaim. The temple will become like Shiloh, the now ruined location where the tabernacle once stood. It had been the holy site where the Ark of the Covenant had resided in the days of Samuel up to David. Now it was a ruin, because the ark was gone, the presence of YHWH was no longer there.*

*Of course this does not sit well. The people of Jerusalem know what this means. The ark will be taken away, the presence of God with it. The temple’s destruction and abandonment surely also means the city’s demise as well. This is all pretty easy to get our heads around. What is probably a little harder and just as necessary is the idea that the Jews of the day thought that ark and*

*Temple were a little like talismans. They were sacred objects which meant that in a pinch God would intervene and save them. In a faithful sense, this could be good, but in this context it was bad. The Jews of the day seemed to think that this gave them a license to do whatever they wanted. After all, God's ark and presence ensured that the city would never fall.*

*Of course, we do not think this way. We don't have sacred space in quite the same way. No one thinks that God will intervene to save some national shrine for us, as if he would keep an enemy from destroying the Lincoln memorial or the Washington Monument or the White House. We count on our jets and armies and defense forces to do that.*

*But I wonder if we are not just as liable to Jeremiah's barbs? Can we not sometimes treat our own baptism this way, as if it was some sort of a talisman that kept us from every having to worry about the fires of Hell, so we can do whatever we want? Do we count our church membership to equate to having our names written in heaven, which means we don't really have to be sorry for our sins in Lent? After all, they are forgiven. Why should I fast, attend another service, or make some other Lenten act of repentance? The deed is done.*

*When Jeremiah prophesied that their temple would be destroyed and abandoned, the people of Israel threatened to kill him. Just in case you don't get just how real that was; the chapter goes on to tell of another prophet named Uriah. His story was not quite like Jeremiah's. The king sent down to Egypt where he had fled and brought him back to Jerusalem for royal justice. If he would have had a military drone, I am sure Uriah would have been targeted. As it was his lifeless body was dumped in the commoners' cemetery. Let the preacher beware, the truth can be hard to bear. Pointing out that someone is treating the grace of God as a license to sin might be met with a hostile reaction. Jeremiah's response to this is really interesting. His resignation to his own death at their hands seems odd to our ears. He is justified, he is right, he does not deny it, but he doesn't fight for it either.*

*As things turn out, cooler heads prevail. The leaders among the people, the religious types, remember that in the days of Hezekiah the same had been said and the king in that time did not put the man to death. Jeremiah's words about blood on their hands would seem to still have some traction with them. They do not do it. But you can see that the margin of respect for that notion is growing perilously thin in Jeremiah's day, as it has grown thin in our day as well. The Christian who speaks the truth should not expect to enter into a civil conversation with principled opponents, but to be met with an all-out attack on his Christianity, his humanity, and his intelligence. He will be called names and efforts may be made to ruin his career, drive him out of town, or worse.*

*But this text is really a text about God, not me, nor you. We hear this today because it is a text about Jesus as much as it is Jeremiah. Can we not see the humble submission of Christ in Jeremiah's submission to the will of the crowd who breath their murderous threats against him? Is this any different than the almighty submitting himself to the petty band of thugs who met him in the garden of Gethsemane and arrested him, beat him, and eventually saw him nailed to a cross?*

*Jeremiah calls out “turn or burn!” Isn’t Jeremiah what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of his long suffering love for the city of Jerusalem? Jeremiah had every reason to turn around and walk off, but he doesn’t. In fact it will be the people who kidnap him and take him to Egypt. He doesn’t want to leave, even when he will be the only one left.*

*Is this the life to which I am called as well? Does my connection to Jesus, as certainly Jeremiah was His prophet, as his follower, am I also expecting and even resigned to the same difficult reality? I don’t have a talisman to keep me safe, or my congregation, my home and family, all the things that I love and treasure. They are all now tools to be used in His kingdom, not possessions, not even my own life. Because he spent his life for me, is my life also now forfeit in service to him?*

*This is a hard message.*

*Might we ask the question of whether we wept for our cities? Chicago and other cities are currently undergoing what one urban mayor called a “slow-mo massacre.” The riots in Ferguson, Baltimore, and other places point to deep unrest and anger. Do we love the people of our land with this passionate love of God? It is easy to speak of love, and think of the warm and fuzzy things that we often associate with that. But what about the families that are so dysfunctional and the structures in our society that are failing people. The students at my daughter’s large Portland high school were forced to use a single toilet for much of the year. This is because students consistently were using them to start fires, smoke pot, and other illicit activities. Is it a problem that my daughter thought this to be somewhat normal? Do we have the intestinal fortitude of Jeremiah to stand up and risk all to say that this or that is destroying people? Do we have the guts to tell our own people that the things in which they are engaged as human beings are terribly destructive to themselves, their children, and their society?*

*Luke records that Jesus wept for Jerusalem. He does not condone the sickness we see in our society. He does not approve and we should not either. We are called to condemn the evil. Our silence is a form of approval or at least a tolerance of the evil. Jesus did deal with this evil by going to a cross. He does not intervene the way we might like him too, but one of the ways that he dealt with the horrors of the Roman Empire was to send the Christians into that killing machine.*

*As Lutheran preachers this is hard. How do we do this without making a Gospel whitewash out of this, how do we do this without making a works-righteousness out of this? I don’t want to give the impression this is easy.*

Psalm 4

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!

You have given me relief when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

<sup>2</sup> O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?  
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah

<sup>3</sup> But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.

<sup>4</sup> Be angry, and do not sin;  
ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah

<sup>5</sup> Offer right sacrifices,  
and put your trust in the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> There are many who say, “Who will show us some good?  
Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!”

<sup>7</sup> You have put more joy in my heart  
than they have when their grain and wine abound.

<sup>8</sup> In peace I will both lie down and sleep;  
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

#### Philippians 3:17-4:1

<sup>17</sup> Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

*If you are reading this through, as I trust you are, Paul seems to pick up right where we left off with Jeremiah. Paul exhorts the Philippians to a life of radical humility and service. Paul demonstrates that himself. He has completely displaced himself from the center of his universe, and replaced that ego with Christ. Better said, Christ has done all this to Paul, graciously. Paul could write with all sincerity that he did not care whether he lived or died, it was all for Christ. That is a fairly radical displacement of the ego.*

*What does it mean then to live as an enemy of Christ? It is surely the life still lived with myself in the center of that picture. Their god is their own appetites, they worship their god by satisfying their own needs and looking to their own security, instead of what serves Christ, the Christ who stands at the center of the universe Paul inhabits and around whom Paul orbits completely.*

*Paul exhorts his readers to the same sort of humility. To them he offers this hope, the good work begun will be brought to completion (1:6) and they will have their lowly, dying bodies transformed to be like Christ. This will happen as an act of God, not of men.*

*Thus Paul exhorts them to stand firm in the Lord, not in themselves, trusting no one else.*

*If you have seen Gran Torino with Clint Eastwood, the language is terrible, but the ending is great. He walks right into the teeth of this violent gang armed with a lighter. Pours out his life, to save another life, and in so doing brings down the evil. It is a little like Paul whose confidence is that God will transform this lowly body. As Walt Kowalski faces them, he is praying. Jesus has got this for Walt. Jesus has it for us too.*

Luke 13:31-35

<sup>31</sup> At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” <sup>32</sup> And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’ <sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’ <sup>34</sup> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! <sup>35</sup> Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

*A marvelous text. “Go tell that fox.” Of course we can use this to bash literalists and fundamentalists. They use their imagery and literary devices as well, or they are forced to conclude that Herod had four black feet, a pointy face, and a red bushy tail.*

*But that would not be what we want to do, no matter how much fun it is to bash the literalists and fundamentalists.*

*Jesus is warned that his life is in danger, even the Pharisees, who are often so critically treated in the Gospels, can show a bit of humanity. It appears that they were not all so sure that Jesus was the enemy. I think we need to be a little more nuanced about the Pharisees. Remember that the Psalmist in Psalm 119 spends 175 verses waxing eloquent about his love of the rules, statutes, and ordinances of our God. It is also in our Bible, even if we don’t read it as much as we ought.*

*But it is Jesus’ response to which we are drawn today. First we get pulled by the OT and the Epistle lesson. Jesus casts out demons and heals today and tomorrow and the third day finishes the course. Is that a reference to the Passion narrative? Just what does that mean? I must admit that I am not sure. He repeats the third day motif in the very next verse. It is important. At best what I would do with this is to say that the passion is looming large in the thinking of Jesus. Everything on his agenda seems to be done in three days.*

*But then Jesus laments over Jerusalem. It has slaughtered the prophets and killed those whom God has sent to it, Jeremiah escaped with only his life, remember, poor Uriah did not. You would think that he would be fed up with that most unholy of cities, but he is not. The inhabitants' penchant for slaughtering God's emissaries is about to be transformed into the very mechanism of the world's salvation. How weird is that!? Jesus, however, gives us a glimpse into the heart of God. He wants desperately for the rebellious citizens of Jerusalem to come to him, that he may care for them, gather them into his arms as a mother hen gathers her chicks and defends them. But they refuse.*

*Their refusal has grim consequences. Their house is forsaken. Surely this means the temple, yes, but what more? House is a word that has so many meanings in the ancient world and in our world. Does it refer to the whole house of Israel? Is Jesus looking ahead to the conversion of the Gentiles? Does this mean something else?*

*Now they will not see their God until they say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Is this why these words are woven into the Sanctus, which we might sing before the Eucharist with people around the world? I always thought it was a reference to the Palm Sunday event where indeed the throngs said those very words.*

*It seems that we have several places and options for this and perhaps our sermon will reflect one or more of these:*

- 1. Jesus, the master of his destiny, plans to die in Jerusalem. This sermon speaks of God's willing sacrifice on our part, giving up himself for us. It will plug nicely into the Philippians text as just a little while before these words Paul has quoted the marvelous Christological hymn of 2:5-11 which will show up again on Palm Sunday. This sermon will assert that Jesus sacrifice for us is intentional, not an accident, but the loving, sacrificial action of God. The cross is not Jesus' mission gone awry, failing. Peter thought it was and our temptation is to think so too, but the cross is at the heart of Jesus task, his mission to this world.*
- 2. The heart of God – he desires and loves even the people of Jerusalem, even those who live there today and who have made such a mess of our national security and political world today. Would we really be fighting wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan if the control of Jerusalem was not such a passionate matter? Yes, there are other reasons we are there, I know, but can we really think that this has not made this situation just so much more tense? God loves every pigheaded stinker who is fighting there today.*
- 3. God's Self-Sacrifice as the mechanism of Grace. Jesus will accomplish the desire of God, not by exerting his power, but by losing his very life. He knows this and he will not be turned aside from it. Even his foes are warning him, but he does not turn aside. He has set his face to Jerusalem, to a cross, to a gruesome death and the coldness of a grave. He will not be deterred; his love will walk this road.*

4. *The stubborn, willful, rebellious nature of man is not greater than the gracious, giving, loving nature of God. As hard as that is for us to see, Jesus demonstrates is clearly. The people of Jerusalem have long offended, yet they are still loved. This Jesus indeed comes to us in this place, we sing the very song which he enjoins because he rides into this community with pierced hands and feet and side, to give his broken body and shed blood for us to eat and drink, that we too be saved, despite our repeated and senseless sinning.*
5. *God has plans – This has been in God’s mind for a very long time. It is said that Moriah, the mountain on which Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac was this very hill in Judea where the temple was built and where Jesus would be sacrificed. How many lambs had met their end here in anticipation of this Lamb of God? God foreshadowed this, even with Jeremiah willingly offering up his life to the murderous crowds of Jerusalem, before the doors of the temple.*

*There is a wonderful little poem by Howard Nemanov who writes about the blades of grass in his lawn and the chattering blades of his lawn mower. The mower’s blades seem so hard and cruel, so deadly and powerful, yet, when the lawnmower lies silently rusting in a scrap-yard somewhere, those blades of grass will still be pushing ever upward. Who wins?*

**Law and Gospel** *I wanted to try this a little differently, I think that the Law and Gospel here ascend.*

**Law:** Death is my enemy. I fear it, I hate it. It snatches my loved ones from me and someday, it will snatch me from those I love. The process is terrible, painful, and really ugly. I hate death.

**Gospel:** Jesus has died, today we see him set his face resolutely toward the death. He is not afraid of it; he does not run the other way. Jesus confronts his death with a bravery and courage I am not capable of.

**Law:** Death is a closed door which I cannot open. I am powerless before it, and when I am trapped inside it, I cannot escape. Its darkness is absolute and complete. As one T-shirt once expressed, “It is not that life is too short, but that you’re dead for so long!”

**Gospel:** Christ Jesus has conquered death. His empty tomb has burst that iron clad gate and released the prisoners held there.

**Law:** By entering death and coming out the other side, Christ has established his kingdom through the Cross, now he has invited me to pick up that cross and follow him, trudging up the weary hill of Golgatha. He has conquered death, used it to work his salvation, but I still hate it. I am still afraid of that cross.

**Gospel:** Christ kept his eyes focuses on the outcome. The innocent blood shed was the effective means of salvation, it was the stronger love of God shown to the

rebellious children of Adam so that, in the words of Paul, they might shine like stars, bodies transformed to be like his glorious body we saw on Transfiguration's hill a few weeks ago. God will act, even when I am paralyzed by my fear or powerless in death.

**Law:** If I am honest with myself, I can only see with these mortal eyes my own death, and I cannot see beyond that blackness. Corpses have been stubbornly resistant to resurrection in my experience. I am afraid.

**Gospel:** Jesus opens our eyes of faith to see what these sinful eyes cannot see by themselves. Today he gives us new eyes to see his world through His cross, a world in which every sin is atoned for, every tear is dried, every hurt is healed, every death undone. He gives us hope.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (That the hearer would, by the working of the Spirit of God, be filled with the love of God for the whole world, even the loathsome and difficult people, empowered to love by the universally applied sacrifice of Christ.)

Look to the notes under the Gospel lesson about the heart of God.

Both of the proposed sermon themes are familiar and regular parts of this study. But this is foundational material which will show up again and again in the preaching of God's people.

This sermon will draw on the inexplicable situation in Jerusalem today which has so perplexed the nations of the world. The religious passions which drive Jews, Christians, Moslems in that part of the world make the idea of peace in the Middle East seem like such a far off dream. Jerusalem means "city of peace!" Every time we get close, someone with a gun or a bomb shatters the fragile peace.

You wonder sometimes why God doesn't just destroy Jerusalem and start over. But today we don't get any such picture of God. He loves them. He would make like a hen and gather them under his wings. In fact he loves them so much that to express his love he will subject himself to their violence and die on the cross, just so he can tell them he loves them, all of them. The ones we like, the apostles and others, and the ones we don't like, the Pharisees and the coarse Roman soldiers. He loves the alien and the friend.

Of course it is easy to point to the rebelliousness of people living half the world away from us. It gets much harder when God's scandalous love comes closer to home. He loves the people I loathe. In fact, my loathing of any human being is putting me out of step with God and his gracious kingdom. That is not to say that I have to accept or approve of anyone's behavior, but I am called upon to love them, despite themselves, just as God loves me despite me.

Look up your congregation's charter, I bet it has something in there about preaching the Gospel to the whole community. They usually do. (Interestingly, Zion Lutheran in Salt Lake City had as its fifth or sixth reason for forming the congregation: "To save the Danish maidens from the Polygamists!" But this is the exception to the rule.) For most of us, a universal mission was there in our beginnings, and it belongs in our present as well. Yet most of the congregations I have served have struggled to see too far beyond the horizon of their own members. How do we express that charter today? How do we fail and need to repent? How have we become this little clutch of people who know each other so well and enjoy each other so much that we have forgotten this mandate to love this town and community? And then, how shall we do that today? It is harder as morality is often seen simply as a rule to be broken, but we don't see the other side of that equation.

The preacher of this sermon may just want to send his parish home with an assignment. Return next week with an idea, a need they see in the community. Perhaps the parish will want to ask what they reasonably can do. If there are hungry people you need not start something new, just take up an offering for the foodbank which already exists.

*I don't quite know where to go with this, but it seems to fit in here somehow. If we would love with Jesus' love, just how does that happen? What does a divine love say to this community and this world in which we live? How does he express it? Some time ago an editorialist drew attention to the tragedy of young people enslaved in the trafficking of their bodies in the sex industry. It turns out this is not an affliction of some Southeast Asian country, but a scourge which is eating at the souls of many young people right here in Portland.*

*In the course of this, she doesn't seem to realize that she makes the argument for the people she has often and otherwise mocked, the churchly sorts of folks who urge morality and abstinence and discipline. The children who are running away from troubled homes and abusive relationships are, in her own words, virtually driven there by the failures of their own people. They are inured to the spiritual poverty of such a life by the television and films which depict sexuality as this cost-free entertainment. We know better, so if we would love these young people perhaps it is time to stop ridiculing the structures which provide safe, healthy homes for young people. Perhaps it is time to start holding up marriage as a virtue, and to start pointing to the real cost of divorce. Perhaps it is time to jump with the same sorts of eagerness on the good work that people are doing as her newspaper does upon the news that some religious person has failed to live up to a vow or otherwise compromised his/her faith.*

How shall we love with Jesus' love? Do we begin with Jesus love? Do we weep for our community? Should we perhaps as a congregation simply weep for our city? Shall we by the power of the Spirit be softened toward, and opened toward to the suffering our

community. The Spirit uses weeping, perhaps chemically, to change our attitudes and our hearts.

This is a very human being sermon, not a human doing sermon. When we weep for it, is there really a shortage of ideas for how to love them? Perhaps the problem will be where to focus the attention. Jesus weeps for his city today. Shall we simply join him? This is a sermon which realizes that we are a priesthood of believers, a group of people whom God has set aside for the sake of the rest of the population. Priests stand between God and the people and present their needs and requests to God. Is this our real role here, to pray for those who do not have the promise that God hears them as his children? We can offer to pray for people, it's cheap, asks nothing of them, yet says much to them.

2. "I finish my course" (That the hearer would embrace the cross as the mechanism of the kingdom. Not only has Jesus died for me, but now he calls me to a life of sacrificial service in His cruciform kingdom.)

Lent takes us to the cross, a Friday which we strangely call "good." The readings today begin to introduce us to the mystery of that great work of Christ. In this strange turn of events, the very rebellious people who are running so fast and far away from God and his will and his desire, end up doing exactly what he wants, working His great love for them.

It will happen when Jesus shoulders the burden they lay upon his shoulders. They think to destroy him, but they end up enthroning him. They seek to end his life, but they spread his life to every believing heart. They want to snuff the flame of the Jesus movement, but they end up creating the world's largest and oldest institution.

Jesus can see all that, they cannot. Like the people who line up to spit on him, beat him, and finally kill him, I have a decidedly limited vision. I see death and suffering and I can only find in it something to avoid, something to flee, something to work very hard lest it befall me.

But Jesus sees exodus, Jesus sees redemption for the whole world, Jesus sees salvation itself.

Today he invites us through his servant Paul and his own words to have our eyes of faith opened by His Spirit to see our own self-sacrifice, our suffering, even our own death, through a completely different lens. He will die, cruelly, terribly, and he knows it, but he will not be deterred from this goal. For he also sees that his blood shed is the redemption of the whole world. Likewise, everyone of the men who followed him as disciples would suffer, and all of them, save Judas, would suffer for Him. Their lives given, often into death itself, became the testimony of the early church that brought countless people to faith.

Today the same Jesus is portrayed and present in our fellowship, in our lives, in faithful hearing and eating and drinking. His cruciform love now shapes our lives as well. He

bids us to see that suffering as he does, as one of the ways, the central way, that he works his salvation to this generation. While we do not seek to suffer, nor do we flee from it. For we know that in our suffering, we are close to Christ and we are his instruments for the salvation of this generation.

The old man clings to his fears, for he knows nothing else. Jesus, in baptism, empowered by the Spirit, has raised up a new person who sees and thinks and acts very differently.

Three years ago Lou planned to preach this to a congregation of elderly folks, people for whom death and the questions it raises are immanent. He saw this then as a word of comfort for them. They are hungry to hear this, they have heard it before, but they cannot hear it too often. After all, I don't really remember what I had for dinner three weeks ago, but I know it fed me. They need to be fed today, to hear that good news once more that feeds and sustains them.

Jesus has gone to Jerusalem, to face death with them and for them. The cross speaks a powerful word of comfort to the person who is facing death. "Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes."

3. Standing Firm in Christ (That the Spirit of God would impart the firmness of Jeremiah, the firmness of Paul, the firmness of Jesus to the hearer.)

The temptation which confronts us here is find our steadfastness in our own abilities, our own faith, our own ability. But this will not be firmness, but building on the sand. Remember the Collect's words about our lack of strength. The firmness which is evidenced in all the readings today is a gift from God, it is an act of God in the lives of Jeremiah, Paul, and Jesus. They did not try real hard, properly order their lives and priorities, and thus stand firm. They are examples of firmness because God did something there.

Jeremiah was given a vocation, a calling, from God. Paul was knocked off his horse and turned around. Jesus is filled with the very love of God for all humanity. These men are all instances of God at work in this world achieving what God would do.

The Gospel will have to flow from the fact that we have been given God himself. Christ has come to us in baptism and sacrament, in word and deed. That presence of Christ enables us to stand firm. We are observing and proclaiming a reality which the world cannot see, but which is obvious to us.

But then the sermon will need to ask what is the context of that firmness. To be firm is just dandy, but so what!? Firmness is required when the world pushes hard against us. Jeremiah faced great political and social pressures. Paul was in prison, facing a death sentence. Jesus is resolute in response to the warnings that the King seeks his life. But what about us? What calls us to be firm?

Is this the simply temptation of culture? Are we so surrounded by a hyper-sexual culture, and that often a deviant culture, that we have lost all sense of what is really Godly and normal? Do we need to stand firm there? But what does that firmness do for us or for the kingdom.

It would seem that the world pushes us very hard to quietude and private faith today. The world says our faith is all fine and good, but be quiet about it. Jeremiah would have found it easier to be quiet, Paul too. Jesus it appears could have walked away and enjoyed a comfortable retirement on the beach in Galilee doing an occasional healing to make money. But they all were firm and resolute in their mission. Our mission, our very nature as the people of God is to be a proclamatory, evangelizing people. We cannot be cowed into silence, but we will be firm, raising our voices to praise God for his gifts, inviting the lost sinners to the blessing and banquet of heaven.

The preacher cannot forget that this firmness is a gift from God. It is easy to make this into a proclamation of a new law. It is rooted in our own weakness first, a weakness which God has transformed. This means we cannot say we are too weak to be firm. That is simply not the issue. The disciples are all portrayed as losers in the Gospels. But they all willingly faced death and most died for their proclamation. The encounter with the risen Christ had changed them too, just as it changes us. Paul was a persecutor, now he faces death for proclaiming the very faith he sought to extirpate.

4. My citizenship is in heaven! (Epistle - That the hearer renounce the kingdom of death and devil to live in the joyful anticipation of Christ)

This sermon would be good for a congregation which has made its peace with the world in which it lives and would simply get along. Jesus has called his people to be in the world but not of the world. One of the ways we live that out is as a pilgrim who knows that this is not our final home. We discussed pilgrimage as a motif a couple weeks ago. You might want to check out that discussion.

This sermon would proclaim the reality of our baptism. On that day, perhaps even when we were infants, God conferred citizenship upon us. This being an election year, this might be a good theme to play with. After all, citizenship, immigration, refugees, and the affairs of state might be resting heavily upon the hearts and minds of our people. There are real benefits to being a citizen. As I write these words in am sitting in an apartment in Italy. I am grateful for my US Citizenship and the rights which are mine. European police and judicial systems do not, for instance, operate on a presumption of innocence. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time might result in being presumed guilty.

What are the blessings and responsibilities which such citizenship confers on us? If I end up in jail in Italy, the U. S. Consulate here will help me navigate the Italian legal system, find me a lawyer who knows English, and petition the courts if they deem it appropriate. Citizenship has benefits.

What are the responsibilities of citizenship? Of course I am privileged and responsible to participate in a democracy such as ours. I cannot just let others do it. If everyone does that, the system stops working.

But what of our citizenship in heaven. First of all it means that my hope is not found in the things of this world. Trust not in princes, says the psalmist. Being a citizen of heaven means I have a king, his name is Jesus, his hands and feet bear the scars of his love for me. My trust is there.

The kingdom of heaven is being imprinted on my life. This is not a switch which is thrown, but much more like the gradual shaping of a tree by the wind or the way an old tool or article of clothing starts to fit your body after some time. The shape of that kingdom is determined by the king, the one who bears those scars in his hands and feet. He died for sins that day. For my sins, for every sin. His kingdom, his rule, is marked by that merciful love and forgiveness. He has a totally different way of solving the problems we face than the kingdoms of this world. The problems you face, the little ones which nag at you and the big ones which threaten you are all addressed by him.

This sermon will best describe the new human being which is being fashioned one repentant day at a time as the old man is drown and God raises up a new man from the remembered waters of our baptism.