

The Second Sunday in Lent
St. Luke 13:31-35

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

You get an idea of the fixation Jesus has in today's Gospel...how fixated He is on you, that is. He is intent on getting to Jerusalem, and there die for you. He is intent on the task of saving you, of giving you victory over death, the devil, and your own sinful flesh, of giving you life everlasting.

Listen to him:

"Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. 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." 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 would not! 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!"

He spoke of death and Jerusalem and the third day and prophets. Is there any doubt what was on his mind? It's a good thing he was fixated on this, for it is very good news for you.

Of course He had to go to Jerusalem. It's the holy city, but it is filled with such unholiness. It is the place of death for prophets. God would send His prophets to this city, in which sat the house on which He placed His name, and He commanded them to preach destruction and desolation. In return, the people of Jerusalem demanded the prophets' deaths. They would not prophesy good and prosperity for them, mostly warnings against sin from God—destruction and desolation—and so they were hated for it. This is the reputation that Jerusalem had developed.

Jeremiah got to taste it. As you heard in this morning's Old Testament lesson,
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! 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. 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. 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." (Jeremiah 26:8-11)

And what was the prophet's response to all of this?

[A]s for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. 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. (Jeremiah 26:14-15)

In other words, "Look folks, this is the message God has sent me to proclaim. Heed His warning, or this destruction and desolation will befall you. Repent and turn from your ways, and God will relent, and you will prosper in His grace and mercy. That's the message. Killing me will not change that."

There are two points you can take away from this.

This first point is this: God's Word is God's Word no matter how much you like it or dislike it. His message to you is His message to you no matter how sweet or distasteful it may be to you. You may want

to hear only good things from God through His prophets, and when He sends His prophets to proclaim peace and good times, that is most certainly His Word. But who wants to hear wrath from God through His prophets? Still, when He sends His prophets to proclaim doom and destruction and desolation, that is most certainly His Word. Old Adam only wants to be patted on the back, and if God's messengers will do it, all the better!

And that brings me to the second point: the rejection of God's Word is almost always indirect. Rarely do you hear anyone actually say "I hate God" or something similar. The mere thought of that is foolish to most, even the dyed-in-the-wool atheist or adherent to some other religion.

On the contrary, God's Word is rejected indirectly. "Hate the message, kill the messenger," it could be said. Atheists would call those who listen to the message fools, and those who proclaim the message even greater fools. Adherents to some other religion would label listeners misled and the messengers false prophets. Even Christians will do this! They all look for faults in the Bible or the preacher. They have reasons to dislike the liturgy or the congregation. "I don't reject you, O Lord. I didn't like the way it was presented by the preacher...in the liturgy...in this congregation...by the people in this congregation... etc." It makes it all seem "safer", if you will: "No, no, no, God, I don't hate you, I hate the one you sent; I don't reject you, I reject the one you sent."

When Jesus sent out the 70 or 72 to go into the cities he planned to visit, he prepared them for the journey. He was sending them out as lambs among wolves. He told them to greet the places with peace—"Peace be to this house!"—and if a son of peace was there, peace would return to them. He told them that in some places they would not be received, to which they were to say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near." And to close off their preparation, Jesus declared, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me." (cf. Luke 10:1-16)

Direct or indirect, to reject God and His Word is to reject God and His Word. The indirect method is by no means "safer." Deny it all you want, if you hate and reject the messenger, you hate and reject the One who sent him. When the called messenger speaks the Word of God—proclaiming death and destruction, calling to repentance, proclaim peace and prosperity, forgiving sins—it is the voice of Jesus Christ that is speaking. Therefore, to hate and reject the messenger is to hate and reject Christ, and to hate and reject Christ is to hate and reject the One who sent Him, God the Father.

You can imagine, then, that Jesus took this quite personally. Prophet after prophet sent in His name to preach a message of repentance to the people, and the people kill and stone the ones He sent. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" No, it wasn't the prophets that were stoned and killed, though they certainly received the brunt of the people's rejection; it was the very Word of God that was stoned and killed with each prophet.

By the same token, you can imagine that the devil took this in quite delightfully. When people reject the messenger—reject the message—he's got them! When the people killed and stoned the prophets, they were doing his work. When churches complain about their faithful pastors, stir up dissension against their faithful pastors, dismiss their faithful pastors, they are embracing him.

Jesus weeps. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" Psalm 91, the psalm appointed for last week, provides a fitting image for what Jesus said:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. (Psalm 91:1-4)

And a beautiful image it is, too—a mother bird gathers her chicks under her wings. There, they are safe and protected. There they are tenderly guided. There they are safe while the world outside of the wings and feathers rages, possibly even to the point of the mother bird's death. That is representative of Jesus' love for Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..."

"...[A]nd you would not," Jesus continued. There's always got to be that pesky chick that thinks it can go it alone. It refuses the shelter of its mother's wings. The outside world isn't so scary to it. Such was Jerusalem's response to Jesus' love. They rejected the prophets' words; they rejected the Word of God—they were not willing to be under the shelter of the Word's wings.

Predators like those who go it alone. The young, stubborn, and helpless chick that wanders from its mother's wings is easy prey for predators. Those who reject the prophets and pastors sent to them—who reject the One who sent them—are easy prey for the devil, as St. Peter wrote: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8b)

"[Y]ou will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'" Rejected or received, the Word of God remains the Word of God. And, as He remains the Word of God, He remains faithful to the task for which He was sent—fixated on it. Jerusalem would see this Prophet again, and they would proclaim, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" He would be seated upon a donkey; they would be placing palms and clothing on the path before Him. And He would be riding to His death for them, so that like a mother hen, He could gather them under the shelter of His wings...His outstretched, crucified arms.

There, He, who was despised and rejected, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (cf. Isaiah 53:3), shed his blood as redemption for all, even those who despised and rejected Him...who caused Him sorrow and gave Him grief—those in Jerusalem who rejected His prophets and those today who reject His pastors—and also those who receive His prophets and pastors.

Of course He had to go to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city of death for the prophets of God, and especially for *the* Prophet of God, His only-begotten Son. His eyes were fixed on Jerusalem, for He would ride triumphantly into town, die triumphantly just outside of town, and rise again triumphantly just outside of town—there He achieved His goal: triumph over death and the devil, redemption for all, and salvation for all who receive Him and His message—all by shedding His blood on the cross.

He shed His blood for you, dear hearers, that you may say with the Psalmist,
[F]or you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the enemy.
Let me dwell in your tent forever!
Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!
For you, O God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.
So will I ever sing praises to your name,
as I perform my vows day after day. (Psalm 61: 3-5, 8)

Dear hearers, the message remains the same. Where you have sinned, confess that sin. Do not reject the messenger because his message is distasteful. Hear it. Listen to it. Receive it. As much as the call to repentance is distasteful, so much more is the good news he is given to proclaim sweeter. Therefore, repent and receive the good news.

Receive the good news: Peace be to this house. Jesus was fixated on His task...for you: Christ crucified for you, Christ risen for you, Christ ascended for you. Christ gives Himself to you in Word and Sacrament. This He does for your good—that where He is, you may be, too, safe in the shelter of His wings. That is, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." And since the kingdom of God has come near to you, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.