

C Lent 2 3.17.19

Luke 13:31-35

Focus Statement: Jesus did what he said he would do, protected and gathered us.

Once I was walking along the Rockville Pike, a four lane major thoroughfare through the center of suburban Washington, DC, when I noticed the traffic had stopped in both directions. I walked a little further and discovered the source of the congestion, a family of geese had decided to cross the road, and were taking their sweet time doing so, causing a major traffic jam. So severe was the congestion, that soon I heard sirens, police had been called to move the geese along and get traffic moving again. The officer got out of his cruiser and walked behind the geese to encourage them to cross. It was going fairly well until the geese reached the curb. The adults hopped right up, but the goslings were pretty little and a couple of them were struggling to make the jump. So the officer reached down to lift them up onto the curb, and one of the adult geese went crazy, spread its wings and came at the officer, kicking and flapping and pecking. The officer put his arms up to shield his face, trying to pop the baby geese up with the toe of his shoe. Eventually, he got all the babies up on the curb. And as soon as he'd done that, the adult goose immediately stopped attacking him and began herding the babies off the sidewalk and on their way.

This incident happened several years ago, and I think of it every three years when this reading of Jesus longing to gather Jerusalem "as a hen gathers her brood." The ferocity of the goose towards the officer, determined to defend the goslings at any cost, reminds me of the ferocity of Jesus who will go to any length, even to death, to protect and defend us. That's still a good working image, and there's still a lot of weight to that. But this year when I was thinking about that story and this text, I noticed something else about the

goose, something much more human, something that reminded me a lot less of Jesus and a lot more of us. And that is that the goose was ferociously attacking the wrong thing. Because the officer wanted the same thing the goose wanted, for the goslings to be safely across the street. And the goslings were in real danger. There were four lanes of rush hour traffic lining up on either side, traffic that didn't intentionally want to kill a gosling, but could have easily not seen them and done just that if they didn't get out of the street. But the goose couldn't see the actual danger, all the goose could see was this man who was uncomfortably close to its babies, and who seemed to pose a threat to them. So instead of accepting the officer's help, the goose lashed out at its protector, while the officer continued to pop the babies up the curb, now with the added complication of trying to do this, defend himself, AND not hurt a furious adult goose. So while the goose's fierceness still reminds me of Jesus, the goose's misdirected anger reminds me of us.

What really got me thinking in this direction was Jesus' lament before the mother hen metaphor: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" I started wondering what Jesus meant by Jerusalem. Because if Jesus was talking about Jerusalem only as a fixed place in time, a first century city in a remote Roman outpost, then this passage doesn't really matter all that much to us. After all, we live nowhere near Jerusalem, and even if we did, the Jerusalem of today is nothing like the Jerusalem of Jesus' time. So let's talk for a minute about the role Jerusalem played in the culture Jesus lived in, and what might play a similar role in our lives today.

Jerusalem is an ancient city. First settled as early as 4500 BCE and established as a city in 2800 BCE, it is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. Not the oldest, that honor probably belongs to Damascus, which has settlements dating all the way back to 9000 BCE, but still Jerusalem, pretty old. Some traditions hold it to be the place where Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac, but Jerusalem really came into our faith tradition when King David captured it as the capital of the Kingdom of Israel. It was under David and his successor Solomon that Israel, and by connection its capital, Jerusalem, reached their high point. After Solomon's death, Israel and Judea split to form two kingdoms, Israel fell to the Assyrians, Judea to the Babylonians. Then Jerusalem fell to the Greeks, then to the Selucids, and then to the Romans. In modern times, it was ruled by the Ottomans, then the British, and it's currently a city divided between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I share this history not because the dates are important, but so you get a sense of the changing powers. In its history Jerusalem has been attacked 52 times, captured and recaptured 44 times, besieged 23 times, and destroyed twice. So, you know, a lot of conflict.

What made Jerusalem so important during the time of King David, and also so vulnerable to conquest, was its location at the center of what was then the known world. Located where the shipping lanes of the Mediterranean Sea met the silk road to the East, and between the powerful Assyrians to the north and Egyptians to the south, whoever controlled Jerusalem controlled the trade routes, and whoever controlled trade controlled the world. But by the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was an outpost city. The center of power having shifted west to Rome, Jerusalem was mostly overlooked by the Romans unless it caused trouble, and full of formerly powerful people longing for a past glory.

And while we're talking history, let's talk for a bit about one of the reasons Jerusalem had been so vulnerable to conquest. Those prophets Jesus talked about; they're the Old Testament prophets. They were killed because of the message they brought. Back in what was called the golden age of Israel under David and Solomon, it wasn't golden for everyone. It was great if you were David or Solomon, or other members of the aristocracy, or a merchant, or someone else with some money. But if you were a peasant, a slave, a worker, life wasn't so great. If you read the prophets, and I recommend Isaiah, you'll notice that the warnings are always about economic injustice. The prophets come to tell those in power, just because things are great for you doesn't mean they're great for everyone. There's real, serious suffering going on, and people are hurting, and if you don't start caring about the least of God's people, your society will collapse. The Old Testament prophets aren't prophesy as it sometimes gets defined today, as people who predicted random facts about the future, the prophets were truth-tellers, they spoke truth about how the world really was. We sometimes think of prophets like that old-timey arcade game "The Great Zoltar," where you put in a quarter and it tells you a fortune. But the Old Testament prophets were more like Martin Luther King Jr., speaking out about the evils of segregation or Sojourner Truth or Harvey Milk. People who saw oppression and pointed it out, often at great personal risk.

Given that history, here's how I'm starting to read this passage in our context. Jerusalem represents the places, people, institutions who are concerned only with their own power, prestige, and self-preservation. These are cosmic, certainly systemic racism is an example

of Jerusalem, or economic inequality, or the destruction of creation for profit. But there are also smaller, more personal examples. I think about in my own life, my own struggles with greed, or my lack of patience, or my desire for consistency even when that consistency is harmful to others and even to myself, because staying the same is less scary than facing the fact that I need to change. And the prophets are heroes like King or Milk, or the reporters who risk their lives to bring us news about the refugee crisis in Syria, or Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha who first brought attention to the Flint Water Crisis. But prophets are also people who are willing to call us out on our own failings. Teresa's been a prophet to me, teaching me more about people in poverty. I also have a great mentor, who I talk to regularly, who loves me to death and isn't afraid to tell me, Kjersten, you're kind of being a jerk right now, when I deserve it.

Those people are important, but we don't always like them very much. It hurts to be called out for something we're doing wrong. Teresa and I actually have a verbal agreement that we'll call on if one of us feels the need to speak a hard truth to the other, as a check to remind us that it's not personal. But that takes vulnerability and trust, things which are hard and take time.

So here's the really good news of this passage. The good news of Jesus, in fact. In this passage, Jesus spoke of desiring to gather God's people like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but in just a couple chapters he's going to do just that. This passage started with the Pharisees urging Jesus to skip Jerusalem and save himself, but Jesus retorted that he must finish his work. That work being dying so that death might be defeated.

Dear friends in Christ, Jesus is committed to us with the fierceness of a goose ready to take on a full-grown club wielding police officer if it threatens their chicks. And when we, like a misdirected goose taking on a police officer trying to protect the goslings from the actual threat of traffic, lash out and refuse to be gathered. So, and this is maybe the weirdest closing line I've ever come up with, but it oddly seems to fit the working image, I invite you this Lent to let God nudge you in a direction you may not trust at first, to pop you back up on the curb, like the officer popped the goslings. Thanks be to God, who is determined to love us. Amen.