

March 17, 2019 • Second Sunday in Lent

“The Art of the Possible Sermon Series: Impossible/Possible”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of 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! 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.’”

I don't know about you, but sometime I can hardly make myself read the morning newspaper. The news is just too grim and too predictable. Those are the days I get an extra cup of coffee and start with either the comics or the Sports page. Even when my favorite teams aren't winning, sports seems like a great distraction from the troubling realities of the day.

Years ago, as my grandfather got older, I tried to dissuade him from watching the 10 o'clock local TV news. It would make him so upset. You know what I mean. It's always about gruesome murders and rape and kidnapping and robberies gone bad. Gramp would spend the whole next day fuming about what a horrible place the world had become. “Did you see that?” he'd ask, citing chapter and verse of frightening crimes and creepy criminal behavior. I could never convince him to stop watching, though. “I need to see the weather,” he'd say. Mind you, that was in Phoenix, Arizona, where the weather never changes very much. As I look back on it, I kind of like the fact that though it upset him to watch, Ted never disengaged from the world, even though he thought much of it was going to hell in a hand-basket. Now, my mom is the same way. Me, too. I guess I come by it honestly.

But now, I'm the old dinosaur who still subscribes to a newspaper and watches TV news. These have become things of the past, according to the experts. I have lots of friends who get all their news on-line. Some scan several newspapers a day. But whatever form you get your news from, it's all pretty much the same: war, shaky economy, suffering people, imperiled planet. And it only seems to be getting worse and worse.

Maybe all Christians are a form of dinosaur in this regard. We won't stop paying attention to what's going on out there. We won't turn away. We refuse to stop caring. Both love and tragedy abound in this world, and we are crazy enough to let our hearts be broken, again and again, by the pain, the tears, the suffering we see. Why? Because it's God's people who are hurting. Those are our brothers and sisters out there, we insist. And we won't give up on them. And, we know that suffering never has the last word.

Jesus is our role model in this regard. He doesn't shrink from any limitations framed as the merely “possible” in a given situation. He sees beyond, to something new, something not “impossible” for God.

Look again at what's happening in the story we hear from Luke's Gospel this morning. The Pharisees are depicted as those seeking to work what we might call “the art of the possible.” Politics as usual. “Get out of here, Jesus, because Herod wants to kill you.” Remember—this is the same Herod who killed Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. The same Herod who will testify at his trial. Jesus might have been well advised to turn back and go another way.

But look carefully at how Jesus replies. “Here's who I am. Here's what I'm doing. Go back and tell that old fox Herod to keep his advice to himself. For I am casting out demons and healing people. I am preaching in the synagogues and stilling storms. I am dining with my opponents and with the outcast. That's my work and I am accomplishing it here and now, Jesus says. I will choose myself how I will live into what comes next.

Jesus chooses to turn to Jerusalem. He chooses to go there, into the heart of the people of God, into the heart of that city torn by violence and hatred and greed, as it is still to this day, deliberately choosing to follow the path of God's prophets. And it breaks his heart.

Possible/impossible? How does God work to create something new (“the impossible”) in a situation in which the “possible” portends only death?

Jesus laments over the sacred city whose very name means “the city of peace.” Jeru-salem, salaam, shalom. Jesus laments: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”

Jerusalem, the holy city which, for thirteen centuries under Muslim rule enjoyed peace, prosperity and religious tolerance, has been so torn by violence at other times as to have been called by writer James Carroll “the epicenter of God-sponsored violence.” Jesus laments. In one of the most heart-wrenching soliloquies in scripture, he cries out his grief in sorrow and indignation. Jesus' lament reveals the broken heart of God.

Jesus laments and his sorrow grows into longing and a vision for the new as he prays: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..." Jesus yearns for our safety. He yearns for our security and wholeness. He yearns for the peace of all God's children gathered together. He yearns to create a place, a safe harbor, where we can experience the love of God. He yearns for a rebirth and life made new. He yearns for what, by worldly standards, seems impossible.

We would do well to learn from the Bible in this regard, for we have lost the practice of private and public lament. So often we carry the grief and pain we feel around in our own private places of hurt, hurt that festers until it becomes cynicism and resignation. But for the ancient Psalmist, prayer of lament, personal and communal, expressed the pain of the world. Something is wrong -- illness, misfortune, political corruption, natural disaster -- and the faithful cry out to God— confident that God will hear and God will respond.

Remember how the Psalmist would say it: "Listen to the sound of my cry, my God, to you I pray...Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror; Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind; ...Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget about our affliction and oppression? ...I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God..."

This is part of our spiritual heritage, but we have not always kept lament in our first-aid kit of prayer. Instead, we are much more inclined to keep our sorrow inside. Perhaps we think we will hurt God's feelings or offend God if we're really honest about what we feel. We define strength in terms of "keeping a stiff upper lip" and "getting through it" and "staying strong."

But Jesus carried forward that tradition of lament. He was rather brutally honest, wasn't he, about the brokenness he saw in the world, about the sorrow he felt at the death of his friend, Lazarus. It's no wonder that in another place in Luke's Gospel, though he says that mourners shall laugh he never says they must not mourn. Later, in Romans, Paul tells us to rejoice with the rejoicing, but also to weep with those who weep. Our spiritual ancestors give us models for grieving and for lament that are still very powerful healing paths for God's people to this day.

We experienced the power of lament this past week. Our hearts stretched half-way around the globe to embrace the people of Christchurch, New Zealand, where a gunman, just 28 years old, shot and killed 50 Muslims worshipping at Friday prayers. That young man's heart was so enraged by white supremacist rhetoric that he was driven to unleash his fear and hatred onto innocent people at prayer, women, men and children, livestreaming the attack on his Facebook page through a camera mounted on his helmet.

Always a horrifying scene, as we Americans know all too well. But New Zealand, as one commentator observed, is a place of peace where mass shootings do not occur. Until Friday. Called by the Prime Minister an "extraordinary and unprecedented act of violence...one of New Zealand's darkest days."

I reached out to express sympathy to a colleague and friend, an Episcopal priest who had served in New Zealand for many years. I told him that we were weeping with the people of New Zealand. "Weeping deeply are we, too," he said, finding some comfort in our shared tears. "Arohanui, Patricia." Conveying "Deep appreciation" in the Maori language of the indigenous people, gratitude for tears shared.

Many of the dead and wounded are refugees, having fled violence and war in their home countries, seeking in New Zealand a place of safety in which to begin a new life. The Prime Minister said: "they have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us."

The people of New Zealand are weeping, leaving flowers at the site. Reaching out, taking meals to family members at home or waiting bedside in hospital. Standing together to say "we are one," as we are one with our Muslim sisters and brothers here in Santa Monica.

As we now share tears of lament, we pray that somehow these tears will water the tender shoots of healing within, God working within us, to transform our sorrow into wellsprings of new life, for our hearts, our communities, and our world. Jesus laments, but he does so secure in his faith in the abiding power and strength of God. It is a conviction that can gird us to stare straight into the brokenness of our personal lives and of this world without giving in to cynicism and despair. It is a strength that goes deep, that steadies us when it feels like everything is falling apart, that things are going to hell in a hand-basket. It is our firm foundation in a God who hears our cries and loves us still.

As one preacher has put it: "...when we lament a broken relationship, it opens the way to healing. When we lament an injustice, it opens the way to transformation. When we lament our shortcomings, it opens the way to unexpected change. When we lament a loss, it opens the way to resurrection."

Let us be those who never turn away, whose hearts break for and with all who suffer and grieve in this life. For this is never the last word. We do not grieve as those without hope. Jesus shows us that "hope demands that we take a dark view of the present only because we hold a bright view of the future; and hope arouses, as nothing else can...a passion for [making the impossible] possible."

Notes:

Henderson, J. Frank. *Liturgies of Lament*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994.

Final quote adapted from William Sloane Coffin, Jr.

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