

Luke 13:22, 31-35

City of Heartbreak, City of Hope

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

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The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem...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 away from 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.'"

A couple of weeks ago, Cat and I had a meeting with several people who are on the front lines of fighting homelessness. The executive directors of First Light and Pathways and One Roof were there, along with coordinators of services and social workers and outreach workers who go out everyday onto the streets to check on individuals and help to direct them toward the services that can get them housed and lead toward new lives.

Cat had called the meeting because we had been noticing a surge in the number of people we were seeing living in the open. We wanted to know if the problem was growing; we wanted to know if there were ways we could help; and we wanted to know whether the things we are already doing were actually helping, or contributing to the problem.

We learned that the problem isn't actually growing, but shifting; and we learned, to our chagrin, that while many of the things we're doing are helping, some are just contributing to the problem by placing band-aids on people with much deeper wounds, and by masking issues so that the heat is taken off of the government to create more effective policies.

But what really made me sit up was when the director of One Roof said, "If churches and property owners and business leaders and the government all started working together in a coordinated way, we could end homelessness in Birmingham in three years."

We could end homelessness in Birmingham in three years. Sign me up.

Now, do I actually think that's going to happen? No. I give us four years, to allow for trial and error.

Seriously, though, the message that, if we changed and coordinated our tactics, we could solve homelessness—or any entrenched problem—within a foreseeable period of time, is exactly the kind of message we need to hear.

We get so used to addressing symptoms piecemeal, so used to running off in a million directions like a bunch of hyperactive squirrels, that we forget to even hope for actual systemic change. But homelessness is a human-made problem. As such, it is solvable. In fact, there are cities that have, by and large, solved it. That's

why it is so frustrating—maddening—to walk out into a city in one of the wealthiest nations in the world, and find people sleeping on the concrete in the rain.

If we were all pulling in the same direction, moving toward a common goal, there is no reason that every person in Birmingham couldn't have a decent place to lay their heads. No reason.

Now, I'm not picking on Birmingham. We are not alone in the various problems we face. We are not alone in homelessness. We are not alone in having a struggling educational system. We are not alone in segregated neighborhoods or crumbling infrastructure or the epidemic of gun violence. We are not alone, but neither are we universal. If any of those problems have been solved anywhere in the world—and they have been—then that means that, with the right leadership and adequate resources, they are solvable here, as well.

So, if they haven't been solved here, it's because those with the best intentions are pulling in different directions; and those with the worst intentions benefit by not having the problem solved.

Not everyone wants to end homelessness. Not everyone wants to ensure that all children have decent schools. Not everyone wants safe neighborhoods or an equitable justice system. Not everyone wants these things, because many people

are profiting by things the way they are. And that truth is not new. We hear that in Jesus' lament in our reading from Luke.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” Jesus cries, “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!”

You were not willing.

Jesus speaks these words right after he is warned by some friendly Pharisees—it's good to remember that there were friendly Pharisees—not to go to Jerusalem because Herod is looking to kill him. As if Jesus doesn't know. But Jesus will not be deterred. “You tell that fox that I am doing my work and I must be on my way, for it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”

Birmingham is also a city that has specialized in killing the prophets of change. That's how it got the nickname, “Bombingham.” First, it was union organizers who were terrorized and murdered, then it was civil rights advocates. This is not an easy place to work for change. And yet, the prophets of change have persisted. *You* have persisted.

When you have been tempted to move the congregation to safer, greener pastures, you have chosen to dig in and remain. It's been said that a cynic is

someone who has given up but hasn't shut up.¹ You have refused to give up *or* shut up. You haven't given up on the city. Even when this city has been at its most unlovable, you have refused to stop loving it and refused to stop believing that God can bring real transformation even here.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” says Jesus, “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!”

He says this, and then he keeps right on moving, straight toward Jerusalem. Straight toward the powers and systems that stand ready to destroy him. Because no one will divert him from completing his work. No one.

The key thing to remember, when we read this passage in the midst of Lent, is that, while Jesus *is* moving toward the cross, it is not the crucifixion that completes his work. Remember the message he sends to Herod: “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.”

On the *third* day.

Jesus is moving toward Jerusalem, yes. He is moving toward the cross, yes. But that isn't his final destination. His final destination isn't death: it is

¹ Kerry Alys Robinson, *Imagining Abundance* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014) p. 23.

resurrection. Resurrection for himself, for this world, and for all the cities in it.

Including Jerusalem. Including Birmingham.

In the same way, we are not called to keep throwing ourselves against brick walls until we are battered into oblivion. We might get battered, but that's not the point. We are not being called to die for a hopeless mission. We are being called to hope *as* our mission; because it's only if we give up, that death can have the final word.

Because a cynic may be someone who has given up but won't shut up, but hope is love that is too stubborn to give up. It is the love of Christ, shaking his head and lamenting as he watches us doing the same pointless and destructive things over and over; *and* it is Christ persisting toward the cross, nonetheless.

Because he had work to be completed on the third day and he would not stop until it was finished.

So let us lament over Birmingham and all the human tragedies that take place here; let us lament over this world and all the pointless destruction and violence that we see every day. Let us lament over them, but let us never give up on them, because we, too, have work to complete with the help of our same, stubborn savior. And whether we complete that work in three days or three years or even a little longer, so long as we keep following Christ, by the power of the Holy

Spirit there is only one end that is possible, and it isn't death: it's new life for this city, for this world, and for all who live in it.