



**“Gathered In”**  
**Scripture – Luke 13:31-35**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, March 17, 2019**

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!*

It’s not easy being a prophet. As we see throughout Scripture, this calling often brought anguish and isolation for these messengers of God. On a good day, it was a thankless profession. On a bad day, well — you heard what Jesus said ... on a bad day it was a death sentence. Because the prophets of Scripture — from Jeremiah to John the Baptist — had the unenviable task of speaking truth to power. They were the ones who pointed out injustice, and named exploitation for what it was, and took the community to task for disobeying their God.

As Biblical scholar Robert Alter puts it, prophets were “the conscience of the people.”<sup>1</sup> And, people don’t always like to pay attention to their conscience. So it was not surprising for a prophet to find himself at the bottom of a well (that happened to Jeremiah), or — like Elijah — fleeing to the relative safety of the wilderness, or even with his head on a platter (poor John the Baptist).

Needless to say, the powers-that-be didn’t take too kindly to these prophets, and often stopped at nothing in their efforts to silence the cries of “the conscience of the people.” So Jerusalem — the seat of power — developed something of a reputation: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!*

It’s not easy being a prophet. It’s not easy to plead the cause of justice in the face of apathy, or ridicule, or outright hostility. It’s not easy to walk unapologetically into cities that are primed to reject you.

In the most basic sense, that’s what Jesus is lamenting here: Jerusalem is a city that *rejects* its prophets. And not *only* its prophets. Every time the people of Jerusalem condemned these messengers, they rejected the impetus behind their voices — they rejected the very God who sent prophets into their midst.

You see, underlying the prophet’s role as the “conscience of the people” was an even more essential calling: first and foremost, the prophets of Scripture were caretakers of the covenant. They were the ones who tended that holy relationship between God and God’s people, the ones who reminded a fickle community of faith of the blessing that grounded their common life, the ones who proclaimed again and anew that sacred and binding promise: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, Volume 2 of *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), xlvi.

The prophets did not come to Jerusalem just to point fingers or name names; they did not come to criticize or to chastise. The prophets came to this — the holiest of cities, where the veil between heaven and earth grows thin — to call the people back to God. Every command to care for widows and orphans was a reminder that God loves the *whole* community, and that loving God meant loving those on the margins. Every call for repentance was a plea to turn from sin that separates and re-turn to the Lord's embrace. Every summons to do justice and love kindness was a sign that God wanted better *of* them and *for* them. Because God had not given up on this wayward people. God would never give up on this wayward people.

The prophets came to call the covenant community back to God. But, still, the people rejected these messengers ... and the One who sent them. The people insisted on turning away from God.

So Jesus — who has already “set his face to go to Jerusalem” and accepted the prophet's fate, laments the community's fickle faith and wayward hearts: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!*

As Scripture tells it, this seems to be part and parcel of being the community of faith — this tendency to pull away from the God who draws near to us. And if that is humanity's habit, it makes me wonder: In what ways do *we* reject the God who, centuries later, welcomes *us* into the covenant community and extends to us that enduring promise: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” In what ways do *we* — *this* community of faith — pull away from the Lord's embrace?

Of course, we do nothing so extreme as killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to us. And I'm not just saying that to let us off the hook. Far from rejecting those who call for justice, I have heard this community *echo* the cries of “the conscience of the people.” There have been many times that we, too, have raised our voices to lament all that tears away at God's vision of wholeness: racism; sexism; homophobia; a callous disregard for the poor; our nation's fascination with guns, the abuse of creation, the hatred that fuels violence until it explodes in shocking acts of terror ... Yes, we could do more for the cause of justice (in this world, we could *always* do more for the cause of justice); but I believe this community of faith is more likely to welcome prophets than condemn them.

Yet, still, we turn away from the God who seeks us. Still — for whatever reason — we seem to resist being drawn too deeply into God's embrace. Not with the violence of the Jerusalem of old, but with insidious ways we resist living fully into our identity as people of the covenant.

For some of us, it is forsaking the One True God to chase after the god of busyness — that false god who tempts us to fill our lives with to-do lists and obligations and meaningless tasks, until there is no room for practices that sustain. Many of us know this god. And in trying to please the god of busyness, we never pause to rest. We never enjoy the gift of Sabbath, which our Creator set apart as sacred and charged us to keep — not so we'd have one more chore to check off our lists, but so we'd have time each week to reconnect with the One who gives us life.

For some of us, it is denying the Eternal God to worship the god of success — the one who tells us to measure our worth by the grades we earn, or the money we make, or the titles we achieve ... the one who demands offerings of perfectionism and competition and who declares our value lies only in what we accomplish. And, in glorifying the god of success, we disregard the Lord of the Cosmos who formed us in the divine image and called us “very good” — not because of what we've done, but because of who we are.

Maybe you turn from the Giver of Grace to kneel before the twin gods of guilt and shame — the ones who resurrect buried misdeeds and painful memories and spotlight our flaws and failings. These gods shackle us to the worst things we've ever done, rather than liberating us to seek healing and wholeness. And in granting these

gods the power to destroy and diminish, we deny the One who claims us in the waters of baptism and proclaims: “You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Yes – there are so many gods who vie for our attention.

And, in chasing after these other gods, we do not heed the prophets who call us to Sabbath rest and remind us of whose we are, prophets who assure us of mercy and grace. In chasing after these other gods, we reject the caretakers of the covenant and resist the God who sent them; we silence the messengers who come to bring this enduring good news: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

I believe Jesus laments our tendency to pull away from the God who draws near to us, just as he lamented Jerusalem’s history of killing prophet after prophet. Yet, as he made clear long ago — as he faced his own rejection and death — Christ will not forsake the covenant people of God.

*How often have I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* Jesus says. “How often have I yearned to draw you close, as a mother embraces a rebellious daughter, as a father welcomes a prodigal son. How often have I desired to gather you in?”

Jesus did not respond to Jerusalem’s rejection by rejecting Jerusalem’s children. He did not say “good riddance” and abandon course. We know how this story goes: Jesus, the ultimate caretaker of the covenant, pressed on toward the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. He accepted a prophet’s fate and gave himself over to suffering and death. And then — when all seemed lost, when the covenant seemed too broken and the relationship too strained — God the Father responded to our rejection of God the Son by drawing us close once more. By declaring once and for all: “I will be your God, and you will be my people!”

This promise still stands. The One True God still yearns to draw us close. Christ still desires to gather us in, just as a hen gathers her brood under wings that shelter and protect.

The question for us is, “Are we willing?” Are we willing to be drawn into the divine embrace? Are we willing to turn from the false gods that vie for our attention and re-turn to the one who gives us life?

This, of course, is the invitation of this season of Lent. As we continue our journey to the cross, we are invited to travel closer to the heart of God. To resist that tendency to pull away and to receive the grace that enfolds us. To allow Christ to gather us in.

So, I ask you, are *you* willing?

Are you willing to reject the god of busyness and carve out time in over-crowded schedules to commune with our Creator? To obey the commandment to rest? Not as one more item on your to-do list, but as a gift of respite and renewal. Sabbath will look differently for each of us: It can be a morning spent enjoying the beauty of creation, or an hour coloring the devotional calendar we’ve set out for you, or ten minutes spent in silence, listening for God’s voice.

Are you willing to forsake the god of success and seek after the Kingdom of God, where the lowly are lifted up and the hungry, filled? To strive to follow the One who kneeled at the feet of his friends, and showed us the way of service? For you, this could mean stopping by the desk of that co-worker who just returned from a funeral and offering a caring ear. Perhaps it is writing a note of gratitude to the coach or teacher—just noticing the time they invest in the children of your community. Or sitting at table with our guests from Family Promise and listening to their stories. All the while hoping, trusting that you will encounter Christ in the face of another.

Are you willing to abandon the gods of guilt and shame and seek out opportunities to offer grace to another ... and yourself? To show love to someone who has hurt you? To seek forgiveness from one you have hurt? To practice self acceptance and the humility of being human as we gather again and again around this font and this table, where we remember who we are and whose we are — beloved children of a gracious God.

Are you willing to turn from every false god that pretends to soothe and shelter, and return to the loving embrace of our covenant-keeping God?

Christ the mother hen stands ready — wings outstretched to gather in her children — longing to draw us close. Longing to draw *you* close.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Mighty God, as we worship you this day, and remember how Jesus lamented Jerusalem's rejection of prophets and messengers of peace, we lament the horrific suffering caused by the terrorist attack in New Zealand and we firmly denounce extremist violence.

Here, in the tranquility of our sanctuary surrounded by peace-loving friends, it is tempting to ignore the darkness in the world. Yet, as we have gathered this morning to pray, the Muslims in New Zealand had gathered to pray, when the serenity was shattered. The destructive nature of evil was on full display when more than four dozen men, women, and children were slaughtered and dozens more wounded as they knelt for Friday prayers. Like Jews who were gunned down in Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue, and African Americans who were murdered in Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, these New Zealand Muslims were victims of paranoid impulses that triggered senseless bloodshed. We abhor those voices that spew the venom of Anti-Semitism, racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia – malignant beliefs that are diametrically opposed to the values of your kingdom.

God, what is this madness infiltrating our world? Along with mass shootings, our headlines are laced with stories of cheating, bribery, collusion, and corruption. With each passing week, it seems that more individuals join the orgy of evil as hate tramples compassion, disdain eviscerates respect, hostility overshadows decency, and lies drown out truth.

God of resurrection, who pierces the darkness with light, fill us with courage so that we may be a mighty counterforce to the darkness gripping our world. Grant us the determined willpower to plant seeds of beauty and blessing where others have sown seeds of depravity and destruction. Ignite a passion within us to dignify human life by offering hospitality, showing respect, recognizing each person as a child of yours, and building bridges of understanding.

God, we pray that our characters not be warped by wickedness, but that we will remain committed followers of Jesus by showing the world that love, liberty, and justice are the best principles on which to stake the future of our planet.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**