

Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
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O, JERUSALEM!

Luke 13:31-35

I've found Jerusalem to be one of the most fascinating cities I've visited, filled with so many layers of the drama of our human history. I've had the privilege of three visits there over the years. Each time I've been moved by the rich, powerful meanings it holds as holy city for three great religions - Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. Each time I've also been deeply touched by the pathos of tragic conflict woven into the fabric of her people.

Back in 1958, the modern state of Israel was just a decade old. It was divided from the Palestinian territory of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, then controlled by Jordan, by a wall and barbed wire fencing with but one opening. The Mandelbaum Gate, directly under our window at the YMCA, was the one passage between the two bitterly hostile peoples. We looked down on the teeming mass of Palestinians gathered in the small open area in front of the Gate on Christmas morning, the one day the Israelis allowed passage of a limited number of refugees back into their homeland or a few Israeli Arabs out for just a few hours. "*Maybe* they'll allow me across this year." "*Maybe*, Allah willing, they'll let my brother in."

The crowd pressed toward the Gate for a glimpse of a relative not seen in a decade. Shouts of reunion joy were punctuated by howls of grief on learning of a sister or daughter or father's death long ago on the other side. The wall, you see, separated not only Israeli from Palestinian, but also thousands of Palestinian families. Also, because the Old City was on the Jordanian side, Israelis had no access to *their* holiest site, the remains of their ancient temple known as the Wailing Wall. And we Westerners visiting the Holy Lands had to choose in advance *which* Holy Land to visit - the part in Israel or the part in Jordan, for even we could not cross from one to the other. Since most Christian sites - Bethlehem, the Mount of Olives, the Holy Sepulchre, were all on the Palestinian side, that's where most pilgrims went - until 1967, when Israel occupied the entire area.

Thirty years after my first visit, I returned. East Jerusalem and the West Bank had been under Israeli occupation for twenty one years; the intifada resistance movement was well underway. Israeli soldiers patrolled everywhere and stationed themselves, guns drawn, on roof tops and on the parapets of the ancient city walls. While hopes for peace were slim, Palestinians were emboldened by the impact of the intifada on world opinion as Israeli soldiers responded to pin pricks with deadly retaliation, often on young children.

Two years ago, I made my third visit, this time with with the Duluth interfaith delegation. The Oslo agreement had been signed, giving hope at last that peace was a possibility. A process leading slowly toward its implementation was underway. But the Prime Minister had been assassinated by a fellow Israeli; there had been two deadly terrorist bombings; and while we were there, Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister, representing those most opposed to returning the occupied land to the Palestinians and allowing them statehood. East Jerusalem had been officially annexed - for Israel, any thought of returning to a divided Jerusalem was intolerable. At the same time, the Palestinians just as firmly insisted on controlling *their* section of the city, that it might in time become the capital of a renewed Palestine.

Jerusalem remained - its holy sites intact, ironically juxtapositioned one next to another, even as hostile peoples tried to survive side by side, jockeying for dominance, the Israelis here, the Palestinians there. City of Yahweh, city of God, city of Allah: beloved, sacred, holy Jerusalem for three thousand years, center of conflict, focus of enmity, symbol of all that is godly, symbol of all that is tragically broken in our humanness. How little has changed since Jesus walked toward *his* beloved Jerusalem, toward the death he knew awaited him there.

How deeply *he* yearned for Jerusalem to be the city of peace, the city of shalom God always had intended it to be, a city that would honor Yahweh's sovereignty, God's rule over his beloved people. Yet how remote the reality: the poor exploited, the powerful entrenched, even the sacred temple - the Holy of Holies - reeking with corrupt commerce. Even as prophets had been killed there in centuries past, so, too, would the Messiah, the Promised One, meet the same fate in that holiest of cities. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

We might have expected Jesus to call down God's righteous judgment on that evil-filled city, even as prophets justifiably had done centuries before. Quite the opposite. With deep, poignant sorrow, Jesus spoke a strange image of himself: "How often I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, ...and you were not willing!"

Work a moment on that imagery. How totally unexpected that Messiah Jesus would choose a hen to symbolize himself! There's absolutely *no* biblical precedent for that! What about the soaring eagle of Isaiah - or the proud lion of Judah, wilting his enemies with his roar? By comparison, what confidence could a mother hen kind of Messiah possibly inspire? No wonder the chicks scattered.

But a hen is exactly the image Jesus chose...and how haunting it was! If you've ever loved someone you could not protect, you could not shield from harm; if you've ever loved a child who ended up making bad choices you could do nothing about, and you could only yearn that he/she would return to his/her senses, *then* you can understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot force *anyone*, even someone beloved to you, to walk into them. It's really the most vulnerable posture in the world, wings spread, breast exposed, but if you mean what you say about loving those chicks, that is how you stand, yearning for their return so your love might shield them.

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any story. That's just *not* his style! He *will* be a mother hen, standing between her chicks and those who would do them harm. She has no fangs, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.

Which, as it turns out in the gospel story, is exactly what happens. He sneaked up on him one night when all the chicks were asleep. When her cry awakened them, they scattered. She died the next day where all could see her, wings spread, breast exposed, without a single chick beneath her feathers. It broke her heart. But if you meant what you said about loving your chicks, *this* is how you stand - even on a cross.

In a real way this amazing little story recasts Isaiah's image of the suffering servant and John's image of the Lamb of God, sung in today's *Messiah* section, of one who loved his people so deeply that he was willing to take on their sin and brokenness and die for them. For the first Christians, *those* images fit their understanding of the crucified Jesus perfectly. And it turned the whole notion of Messiah upside down - from a conquering hero-king anointed by God, to a servant, a sacrificial lamb, willing to die for his people, a mother hen who enveloped her brood in love, whatever the cost of that love.

In this season of Lent, we journey in the gospel story toward Jerusalem, beloved city of God, where Jesus, servant Son of God, in all his deep humanness would meet his death. In this season, think upon that love, that life, that death...and the life *we're* called to live as his disciples.

Think upon the Jerusalems of our lives, the places where we would seek power and security and contentment - whatever the cost. The reality remains - Jerusalem then and now, Jerusalem any place, will determine its own destiny, because God has given us the awesome gift of human freedom. Even the Christ could not bring salvation to a city that did not want him. *That* choice remains ours in every generation, in every place!