

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Any of you who have spent some time around children can probably relate to the insistence of a toddler who is bound and determined to 'do it by myself' no matter what the task. We adults glibly refer to such an attitude as the 'Terrible Two's' when the little ones are figuring out how to assert themselves and their favorite word is "No!" If we don't have children of our own, we probably have friends or relatives with little ones, so we know exactly what this is like. What we may not realize, while we are trying to remain adult in a situation with a two year old, is that this phenomenon repeats itself when the two year old gets into adolescence. It's the same kind of push back...the same kind of striving for independence...only when they get to be teenagers the stakes are much higher and so is the parental anxiety. It's just so very hard to watch a teenager we love make some bad choices or risk their health or put themselves in harm's way all in an effort to ensure that the adults around them know that they can...and they will...make their own decisions. It's a frustrating and scary situation and can leave a parent feeling helpless and heartbroken. It's painful to watch a teenager we love make decisions that are ultimately going to hurt, not help. It's the kind of situation for which the Old Testament laments were written.

Given what we know about human nature and the drive for each of us to make decisions for ourselves, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise to us that we have a hard time following the rules laid down by God and the commandments given to us by Jesus. On the one hand, we want to take responsibility for ourselves...which we can certainly do if we are following the commandments of God and the wisdom of Jesus...but there's a part of us that wants to do it our own way. And sometimes, there's a part of us that wants to take a shortcut to get to our goal. This is nothing new. This is part of human nature. And this is the very situation in which Jesus found himself two thousand years ago while he was being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. He didn't succumb, but we often do. As a species, we haven't changed much.

As our gospel lesson in Luke begins today, we find Jesus still in Galilee. He's heading toward Jerusalem as his final stop, but for the moment he is teaching and healing in Galilee. He chastises the crowds for not being able to read the signs of the times. He reminds them that they know when it's going to rain or when to expect a warm breeze, but they don't seem to be able to understand the significance of what's happening in their present time. It gives us pause to wonder if we understand the significance of our own time.

Jesus warns them to repent...to change direction...to strengthen their relationship with God or they shall surely perish. Jesus doesn't mince words. He's not interested in being politically correct.

Jesus finds himself chastised by the leader of the synagogue for healing a woman of osteoporosis on the Sabbath. He put the leader in his place by pointing out how kind people are to their animals on the Sabbath...and shouldn't this woman be freed from her bondage on the Sabbath? The people are delighted with his answer and they want to know what the kingdom of God is like, so he tells them that it's like a mustard seed that unfolds into a very large shrub or like yeast that makes flour double in size to make bread. And at the very end of his parables and stories, Jesus reminds them that some who are now last will be first and some who are first will be last.

At that particular moment, that announcement of the reversals that Jesus predicts, he learns from some Pharisees that King Herod is plotting to kill him. Jesus waves that off as if it were of no importance to him at all. Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem. He's on his way to Jerusalem. And he knows that his mission will be completed in Jerusalem. He's not worried about Herod. Jesus knows that he's on God's mission and God's in charge, not Herod.

So Jesus isn't worried about Herod. He has his face set for Jerusalem. It's a city that he loves. It is the city that houses the Temple, the earthly location of God Himself. Jerusalem is the center of Israelite life. And Jesus is painfully aware of how far they have strayed from God's original covenant with Abraham. Jesus knows that there is corruption among the temple leaders. He knows that people in all walks of life are struggling to secure their place in the sun among their own society. Jesus knows that those in religious authority who should know better are ignoring all of God's dictates of human behavior. It's been going on for thousands of years. And if we are honest with ourselves, we know that it's going on in the world in which we now live. Human nature doesn't change.

We live in the shadow of the most powerful political apparatus in the world. The capitol of our nation, the seat of our government, is just a few miles down the road. On a daily basis, we are bombarded by news of people in powerful positions who are gaming the system for their own advantage and for the advantage of their children. The gospel that speaks to us this morning couldn't be more relevant to what we experience on a day-to-day basis. And while we might feel some sense of outrage when we hear these stories, all we need to do is look to see how Jesus responds. He isn't outraged. He is sad. He laments what he sees in Jerusalem and what he sees in places of earthly power and influence. He weeps for how misguided and lost are the leaders of God's chosen people. He expresses his love for those who have gone astray, not his

righteous indignation. He longs to embrace God's people and shelter them from the consequences of their own choices. He longs to embrace us and shelter us from those same consequences. It's not that God is going to bring them down. God is simply going to allow the natural consequences to take place. We are going to bring ourselves down when we turn our back on God's commandments to us as well as God's love and mercy and forgiveness for us.

The gospel of Luke is the gospel of the loving father and the prodigal son. The gospel of Luke is the gospel of the good Samaritan shared with an audience who believed that the only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan. The gospel of Luke is about the loving God who goes to the marginalized, the forgotten, the hated ones in an otherwise orderly society. God reaches out to those who have been shunned by the people in charge. And Jesus predicts that those on the bottom will be those on the top in God's kingdom.

Jesus knows all about how politics works. He knows that human beings will jockey for power and position. He knows that the least among us are the ones that God treasures. He isn't playing politics. He's predicting a leveling of the playing field. And no one now at the top wants to hear this. In the end, God will make it all right. God will ensure justice for the oppressed. In the kingdom of God, those on the bottom in this life will be on the top. And those on the top will be at the bottom. This is God's justice and it will not be denied.

So Jesus weeps for Jerusalem, the city that he loves. He weeps, not for himself even though he knows that Jerusalem is the city that destroys its prophets. Jerusalem is the city that eradicates those who have the temerity to speak truth to power. Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets. And Jesus knows that this will be his fate as well as he completes the mission that God has set before him. We can almost hear Jesus saying, "I want only to love you! I want only to save you from yourselves. I want only to bring you back into a close relationship with God. I want only to gather you up under the safety of my wings as a mother hen protects her brood."

Do you suppose that Jesus weeps for us? Do you suppose that we are like those toddlers or adolescents who insist on doing it by ourselves?

During this season of Lent, we are turning ourselves back to a close relationship with God. During this season we are charged with taking stock of where we are in the choices we make about our lives...about our thoughts, about our decisions, about how we spend our time, about how we treat others, about what we stand for, about what is truly important to us. Jesus is calling to us, just as he called to those in Jerusalem. Will we accept his love? Will we let him gather us up under the safety of his wings? Will we turn back to the God we know and profess to love knowing that we have wandered away like lost children?

That's what the self-examination of Lent is all about. Not that we should chastise ourselves or punish ourselves for our wrongdoing...whatever that might be...but that we will be given the insight and the will to see how far away we have strayed so that we might turn back toward the God we know and love. That we will be given the strength to make our actions match our words. That we will allow ourselves to accept the extravagant love and the bottomless mercy and grace that God is offering to us through Jesus himself.

Such is the nature of the season of Lent that God has provided to us. Let us release our own headstrong will that demands that we 'do it by ourselves' just like the toddler or the rebellious adolescent. With God's help, let us use this time wisely and as God intended...to move even closer to the God who loves us no matter what!

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.