

## You Were Not Willing

What is it that causes the creatures of God's creation to reject the love of their Creator? Why was it, in the words of Charles Jennens' great libretto for Georg Friedrich Handel's sacred oratorio, "Messiah," adapted from Isaiah 53, that Jesus, God's only begotten son, should have been "despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"? There have been many answers to these questions over the ages but one theme returns again and again. It is the pride of the creatures that separates them from their Creator. The Bible and spiritual literature portray the fall of Lucifer as being based in pride – a mighty servant of God no longer content to serve but desiring a realm of his own. In the epic poem "Paradise Lost," John Milton's Satan speaks the immortal line of reason for his rebellion: "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n." The Genesis account of Adam and Eve's disobedience is often traced to their pride, to their serpent-goaded desire "to be like God, knowing good and evil." This notion that pride is the basis of the fall, first of angels and then of humankind, surely resonates with us as we consider the sources of selfishness, brokenness and human evil today. The temptation to declare ourselves as rulers of our lives in God's place, the urge to disavow our need of God and God's laws in order to establish our own will as supreme, these impulses lurk in the dark corners of our lives, always ready to surge to the fore. We are always ready, like a willful two-year-old, to say to our Heavenly Father, "I do it myself!" but it is to our great loss. For as we read in our Gospel passage this morning, God always stands ready to gather us up, protect us and love us.

There are, I think, three pictures of pride in this little story and three reactions of Jesus to their different expressions. First, we have a reminder of the pride of Herod. This is Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea under Roman suzerainty from roughly 4 BCE until AD 39. A weaker version of his father, Herod the Great, Herod Antipas felt himself no more constrained by the laws of God or the opinion of Man than did his father. He put aside his first wife, causing a later war with her father the King of Nabataea, and married his brother's widow who was also his half-sister. When John the Baptist excoriated him publicly for this action, he had John arrested, even though the religious authorities had not dared to move against him due to public opinion, and eventually, due to the conniving of his wife, beheaded him. Now he is moving against another man the religious leaders dare not oppose publicly – Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus' opinion of Herod and Herod's vaunted self-opinion is clear once we untangle the idiomatic language he uses. First of all, there is his use of the word "fox" to describe Herod. In our European American culture, that word carries certain connotations. We admire foxes for their craftiness and their beauty. To be "as sly as a fox" or "crazy like a fox" can be considered positive attributes and which of us who remembers the 70s didn't want to be considered "foxy"? I personally greatly enjoyed the wily but honorable fox of Wes Anderson's filmic adaptation of Roald Dahl's book in last year's "The Fantastic Mr. Fox." But there was probably none of that underlying positive in what Jesus said. In rabbinical literature, the word fox is often used as a term of contempt. Randall Buth's researches, particularly into the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, suggest that Jesus "was commenting on Herod's ineptitude... pedigree, moral stature and leadership." Buth recommends that we substitute for the word "fox" words like "poser" or "clown" or, keeping it in the animal kingdom, "weasel." Another commentator, the British scholar A.R.C. Leaney, cites an Aramaic idiom behind the Greek of Luke's repeated words, "today and tomorrow, and on the third day." Leaney says that this is better translated, "day by day, and one day soon." "Eventually," in other words, or perhaps "when I'm darn good and ready." "Go and tell Herod, that weasel, that I have things to do and that he can't stop me.

## You Were Not Willing

When I'm ready, I'm going to Jerusalem. That's where God's prophets are killed." Jesus is not afraid of the prideful, petty tyrant who beheaded his cousin John. For all his pride, Herod is not in control of Jesus who is clearly in charge of the end of his own story.

Nor do the Pharisees hold much sway over Jesus, which must have surprised them. As respected religious leaders of the day, they were surely used to having their advice followed. They were also risking Herod's displeasure by going out of their way to warn Jesus. They must have thought that he would be both impressed and grateful. But Jesus will have none of it. And it is possible that both the Pharisees and the disciples would have been surprised by Jesus' characterization of Jerusalem as "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." Jerusalem, after all, was a symbol of the spiritual pride of all the Jews – the capitol city of the chosen people. Jesus would have been expected to glorify Jerusalem; the ancient capitol of David and Solomon's united Israel and the location of the great Temple of Yahweh, the house where God dwelt. Psalm 48 heralds Jerusalem as "city of our God, the city of the Great King" and Psalm 2 claims that God has marked Zion as God's own holy hill. Even today, this exalted image of Jerusalem remains among Christians. The hymn by John Newton, the writer of "Amazing Grace," is still sung by many Christians: "Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God." A strong image in Christianity for years has been the idea that the church was the new Jerusalem, that by right belief and right actions we could create a paradise on earth that would be the true City of God. As a boy in England, I learned a hymn based on a poem by William Blake that rather famously promotes this idea. You may recognize at least part of the second verse: "Bring me my Bow of burning gold; Bring me my Arrows of Desire; Bring me my Spear; O clouds unfold! Bring me my Chariot of Fire! I will not cease from Mental strife, Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand, Till we have built Jerusalem In England's green and pleasant Land." Beginning in 1974, as he was starting his first campaign for President, the late President Reagan often quoted the early American Puritan leader John Winthrop who said, "We will be as a city upon a hill," referencing Jerusalem as a model for the American Experiment. But Jesus was not interested in civic or religious pride in the City of Zion – he had another viewpoint on Jerusalem. He thought of the city and remembered the mistreatment of Jeremiah, and the stoning of the prophet Zechariah during the reign of King Joash, and many, many more. Jesus remembered that the Holy City had often been less than faithful to God and God's messengers, perhaps never as Holy as it claimed.

The tone of Jesus' response to the Pharisees seems to shift with his subject. His dismissal of the proud posturing of Herod is casual, even humorous. His initial description of Jerusalem carries a sharpness, even anger. But his reflection swiftly turns to tenderness that is heart-breaking. Can any of us fail to be moved by the image of the mother hen with her chicks? In a sermon on this passage, Barbara Brown Taylor describes the chapel of Dominus Flevit, "The Lord Wept", nestled on the side of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kedron Valley from Jerusalem. It is built on the site traditionally held to be the place where Jesus spoke his words of lament and warning for Jerusalem. The mosaic she describes is featured on your bulletin this morning. "On the front of the altar," she writes, "is a picture of what never happened in that city. It is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them, with black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies. But, it never happened,

## You Were Not Willing

and the picture does not pretend that it did. The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English they read, "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!" The last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks' feet: *you were not willing.*"

It is an interesting juxtaposition of images. Jesus, the fiery prophet unafraid to taunt the tyrant Herod as an "egg-sucking weasel," as we used to say down home, is also the tender mother hen. But then the hen is not afraid of the fox either, when it comes to protecting her babies. Those who have raised chickens can tell you, the mother hen will keep her chicks behind her wings and bare her breast to the fox, giving herself up to him so that he will be sated and leave without the smaller, weaker morsels. Again, from Barbara Brown Taylor: "If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world -- wings spread, breast exposed -- but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand... Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, 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 he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her -- wings spread, breast exposed -- without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but it does not change a thing. If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand."

Jesus knows that God's limitless mothering compassion has been calling Her people to come and rest in Her care for centuries, and that the call has gone unanswered. He knows, too, that his call will go largely unanswered, that the people will hail his entry to the city, then turn on him when he does not meet their expectations. He knows clearly what those expectations are: for a hero-Messiah to deliver them from the Romans, to lead them into an imagined Golden Age when they and their city will be powerful and respected in the way of the world. Their pride in being the Chosen People must be assuaged. They think it will prove that God dwells among them in the beautiful house on the hill but they are mistaken. That house is left to them – it is empty. God is not confined to the Holy of Holies or to Jerusalem or even to the people that God has chosen as set apart for Godself. The Spirit of God blows where she chooses, into the lives and hearts of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave or free; into the hearts of those humble enough to receive. Jesus has been preaching an unexpected message all along and when he reaches his destination, they will kill him for it.

In the previous chapter to this encounter with the Pharisees, Luke records that Jesus told his disciples that he had come to bring fire to the earth. As it turns out, the fire of anger that is kindled in the people of Jerusalem claims Jesus. Some of you may remember a story I told when we last looked at this passage. It had to do with a natural mystery that baffled biologists for years. Rev. Paul Widicus of Centralia, Illinois is my source: "When large grass fires would burn thousands of acres in the western plains they wondered how prairie chickens, and other birds who could not fly well, managed to survive. With the fast moving flames fanned by high winds it seemed impossible for these birds to even exist in the grasslands, but their research showed that

## You Were Not Willing

they actually thrived after a fire. One day a researcher was walking across an area that was burned and charred. He came upon the burnt carcass of a prairie chicken and stopped to study it. Seeing it lying there dead made him angry, so he kicked the carcass as he started to walk away. When he did, several small baby chicks ran out from under it into the brush. Further research found that when there was a fire the mother hen gathered her chicks under her as the fire swept over them and she continued to sit on them, sacrificing her own life, so her chicks could survive. With no predators left after the fire, the chicks grew and thrived.” Like the humble prairie chicken hen, the King of All was ready to die so that we could grow and thrive. With the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus, the ultimate predator, death, is powerless.

As we read this story, I’m sure we’d like to identify with Jesus, with his courage and with his compassion. We’d like to but would it be honest? If we’re realistic, we may find that we have much more in common with his listeners and with the people of Jerusalem. Those to whom Jesus spoke glorified Jerusalem, that city that killed the prophets. What do we glorify that is deadly? What do we celebrate that holds only emptiness? The dominant culture that surrounds us celebrates acquisition and specific, ever-changing definitions of physical beauty. Yet has anyone ever found true lasting meaning in that lifestyle? We could use society’s measuring sticks to show how important and independent we are, how justified our pride is, but wouldn’t we really be better off seeking the shelter of God’s wings?

Or are we perhaps the murderers of prophets? Oh, I don’t think that any of us would actually take part in the lynching of someone who spoke against our lives but haven’t we all been guilty in our self-sufficient pride of casually dismissing a word of challenge or good advice? When we hear sermons or lessons on the call of God on our lives, when we read devotional books or the Bible, do we really let those messages sink in and change our lives or do we simply say “oh, wasn’t that interesting,” and then go back to life as usual? Why are we so unwilling to admit our poverty of spirit, to say, “God, I need you?” Are we too proud to take everything to God, to give our burdens to Jesus? “Oh, what peace we often forfeit...”

I don’t mean to imply that any or all of us dismiss God from our lives arrogantly. Indeed, it may be just the opposite. It may be that we think so little of ourselves that we are so ashamed of the darkness we know to be in our hearts, that we can’t imagine that God would want anything to do with us. And, yet that is a kind of pride, too – a backwards pride. A poem by the 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet George Herbert expresses this feeling:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack,  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd worthy to be here.  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

## You Were Not Willing

Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.

The sorrow of the Lenten journey points always to the Good News – that God does love us and that God wants to cover us with wings of love, just like a hen with her chicks. Just like that mother hen, Jesus was willing to die for us, to relieve us from the rapacious teeth of sin and blame and brokenness. The proof of that love is here, hanging above me. Here we remember the body broken for us, the blood shed for us, all out of overwhelming love. No matter where we are in our lives, no matter our cares or our joys, Jesus calls us into relationship with him and with our Loving Creator. Jesus calls us into loving relationship, here at the Cross, with each other and with his Spirit who, in the words of Gerard Manly Hopkins, “over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”