

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 24, 2013
Second Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 15:1-18
Psalm 27:10-18
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:22-25

I did some checking this week, and discovered that in the many times these Scripture lessons today have come to us in the three year lectionary cycle, I have never preached this Gospel text from Luke 13. I also discovered *why* that is the case. This text is a challenge. There are many different things going on, and Luke doesn't help matters when he once again moves events out of chronological order in order to serve his theological interests.

I'd like to try to make some sense of this passage today by focusing first on verses 22-30, and then turn our attention to verses 31-35. In doing so, I believe there is a message of Good News to us as we find ourselves early into our Lenten journey.

The text begins with the telling phrase that Jesus is “always pressing toward Jerusalem.” Luke does not tire of telling us this. Jesus was born for this purpose. He was born to die. And so from the time he is born he is constantly in motion toward Jerusalem and his appointed date with a cross.

With that picture in mind, these verses (vv. 22-30) are an opportunity for Luke to *summarize* the demands and requirements necessary to enter the Kingdom of God. There are a couple of things that lead us to believe this is true.

First, if you consult Matthew's Gospel to find the parallels of these statements from Luke, you will find that in Matthew they are in *six different locations*.

Second, we know this is likely a summary statement of Luke because the things he describes have already been said by Jesus elsewhere, using slightly different images.

The summary of the demands of entering the Kingdom of God are prompted or occasioned by the question (v. 23), "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

Jesus' answer to that question provides us with the first half of the Good News this morning. It comes to us as a warning, and as a challenge. In simplest terms, this is how I would put it to you this morning:

Jesus' invitation into God's Kingdom is open to all, but the way in is narrow and demands far more than just a casual interest. And in fact, although the door of opportunity is open to all, it will not remain open for ever. God is bringing history to a conclusion, to an end, to a goal. And when the door is closed, it will be closed. It certainly will not be reopened for persons whose only claim is that Jesus once visited their town or preached in their streets, or who knew members of Jesus' family. And when the door is finally closed, those admitted will not be not only the expected ones among Israel's faithful, but also the unexpected Gentiles who heard and believed. (Fred Craddock, *Luke: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 172)

I love the words to our collect this morning. The collect begins, “O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy.”

I am so grateful for this truth. I thank God that God’s nature is to show mercy, to have compassion, to be longsuffering like the Father who waits for his prodigal son to return from his self-imposed exile. I am so grateful that God constantly invites us to a place at his table.

But there comes a time, a moment in time, when folks are actually seated at the table and the banquet *begins*. Eventually the moment comes when the person in charge announces, “dinner is served.”

If you’ve ever been to the Philharmonic or the opera, you know how when the time of the performance draws near, the lights will flash indicating that the performance is about to begin. It is a warning that people should be in their seats, ready for the performance. And once the performance begins, what happens if you show up late? You are not allowed in (at least until intermission!).

Jesus is moving toward Jerusalem. Doing God’s work is not a casual thing for Jesus. It requires his life, his soul, his all. He will give his life to secure you a spot at the table, but there will come a time when the doors will be closed and dinner will begin. In modern parlance, Jesus is saying to us this morning: “I’m going to Jerusalem – are you in, or out?”

Now let's look at vv. 31-35 for the second half of our Good News this morning. These verses contain both a threat from Herod, and a lament by Jesus.

Herod is concerned about Jesus because after he had John the Baptist beheaded, people are now saying that Jesus is John come back to life. He wants Jesus dead, but Jesus is not intimidated, and simply pushes things toward Jerusalem.

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem here is tricky, because it implies that Jesus has ministered in Jerusalem prior to this and been rejected, but in Luke's Gospel Jesus *has yet to go there*. Matthew places this incident near the end of Jesus' ministry, which is the natural place for it. In Matthew, Jesus says of Jerusalem, "you will not see me *again* until the Son of Man comes in his glory." Here in Luke, Jesus says, "you will not see me *until* you say, "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." (The NLT gets it very wrong by adding the word "again" here in v. 35; it's not found in the Greek manuscripts, or in many other translations.)

So once again we must ask why Luke subordinates chronology to theology. Jesus' words would indicate a prior ministry in Jerusalem, yet he hasn't been there yet. What's going on?

There are several possibilities. One might be that Jesus had a prior ministry in Jerusalem that Luke simply doesn't mention.

Another possibility is that from Luke's standpoint Jesus' ministry and rejection in Jerusalem are already accomplished facts, and can thus be described in advance.

But I wonder if Luke doesn't have something else in mind. I wonder if Luke places this lament of Jesus prematurely here in order to show that *there is yet time to repent, to receive pardon, and to welcome the reign of God.*

And therein lies the second half of our Good News this morning. To the truth that the door to God's Kingdom will not remain open forever, we add the truth that *as of right now, this moment, it stands open, waiting for you to enter.* There is still time for us to repent, to walk through the door.

No matter who you are today, or where you've been or where you're at in your life – *there is still time, there is still opportunity for you to make a new start, to walk through the door, to embrace whatever it is that God desires for you.* The door will not remain open forever, but it is *wide open* to you *now*. On this Second Sunday of Lent, the question is: what do you intend to do?

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, each of us is confronted again with the reality that Jesus is going to Jerusalem, and in his love he invites us to go with him. We don't understand all that this means, but we've learned enough to know that it is not something we can treat casually. It is not a journey we can take

up half-heartedly. We cannot delude ourselves in thinking that “there will always be time to get serious about following Jesus later.”

So come to the table with faith today. Receive the grace he offers. Then rise up and follow him to Jerusalem – and beyond.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.