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Lent 2, Year C / Luke 13:31-35
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Trinity Church in the City of Boston

Turning Toward Our True Mother

Forty-seven years ago today, at 9:21am Central Standard Time, at Singing River Hospital, in Pascagoula, Mississippi, my earthly pilgrimage began. Which is a long-winded way of saying today's my birthday. Despite having just announced it from the pulpit of Trinity Church, I *swear* to you, I don't normally make a big deal about my birthday. Like many of us, the more trips around the sun I make, the more inclined I am to downplay them. "It's just another day! Let's just have a quiet dinner at home."

But in the Lenten spirit of repentance, this year I'm choosing to go in a different direction. To embrace a new perspective. To claim, unapologetically, that a birthday is, in fact, a big deal! There's a reason we offer birthdays blessings each Sunday. A mere eleven days ago, we had dust smudged onto our foreheads to remind us that our earthly lives are fleeting. Ephemeral. Precious gifts to be cherished. On any day, but perhaps especially on our birthday.

My maternal grandmother's earthly pilgrimage ended a few days after her 94th birthday last December. For years, she had a tradition of calling my mother each year on my birthday at precisely 9:21am. She was adamant that the one who gave the gift of life should be celebrated alongside the recipient of that life. My relationship with my mother has always been a close one. And since we lost my father and her mother last year, the shared heartache of grief has brought us closer. This is why I found the maternal lament in today's Gospel to be so moving: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus cries. "How often have

I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”¹

How remarkable that the almighty Son of God eschews the regal image of the lion, or the mighty image of the ox, and chooses instead the nurturing image of a mother hen. To anyone who complains that maternal imagery for the divine is a new-fangled innovation, I present the ancient words of today’s Gospel. Also ancient are the writings of Julian of Norwich, a 14th-century mystic venerated as a saint in many traditions, including our own. In the poetry of her canticle “A Song of True Motherhood,” St. Julian sings:

God chose to be our mother in all things...
Christ came in our poor flesh to share a mother’s care.
Our mothers bear us for pain and for death;
our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.²

In today’s narrative, Jesus is well on his way to Jerusalem, “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Even in the face of lethal threats from Herod the tyrannical tetrarch, Jesus is undeterred. He is on a mission to reconcile a broken world. To bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to those who are oppressed.³ Meanwhile, his very heart is breaking, knowing that his offering will be rejected. And while Jesus’ lament is directed at the site of his crucifixion – to the city of Jerusalem and her inhabitants – his cry echoes through the ages. Indeed, I urge us to hear Jesus’ lament as an expression of his sorrow, not only for our

¹ Luke 13.34 (NRSVUE)

² Notably, this canticle was approved for use in corporate worship in the Episcopal Church through its inclusion in *Enriching Our Worship*, a supplementary liturgical manual to the Book of Common Prayer that was published in 1994.

³ From Jesus’ inaugural sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4.18), where he cites Isaiah 61.

ancestors, but for the times that we reject him. For those times when, in the words of our Ash Wednesday confession, we fall prey to our “self-indulgent appetites and ways,” and our “exploitation of other people.”⁴ For those times we choose “love of worldly goods and comforts”⁵ instead of heeding his call to store up our treasures in heaven.⁶

The suffering Jesus laments today is not the seemingly random suffering that infiltrates our world – he’ll take that up in next week’s Gospel.⁷ The suffering Jesus laments today is the suffering we bring upon ourselves when we turn away from God. When we seek our will and not his. Which is undoubtedly why the Church reads this passage in Lent, the season that calls us to turn away from sin and repent and return to the Lord.

I readily acknowledge that many of us have a complicated relationship with “repentance,” a word weighed down with the baggage of misperception. Far too often, “repentance” is laden with fire and brimstone. Guilt and shame. But the true meaning of repentance is gracious and inviting. Repentance, properly understood, is a “transformative change of heart.” The Greek word *metanoia* implies the motion of turning. Going in a new direction.⁸ As in turning toward Jesus, who like a mother hen longs to gather us under the protective shelter of her wings.

⁴ From the Litany of Penitence in the Proper Liturgy for Ash Wednesday in the American Book of Common Prayer (1979), 268.

⁵ Ibid., 268.

⁶ Luke 12:33.

⁷ A reference to the Gospel passage for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year C, according to the Revised Common Lectionary: Luke 13:1-9.

⁸ <https://biblehub.com/greek/3340.htm>

When I hear Jesus' lament, I can't help but think of my own mother. I imagine those times when she watched on helplessly as I chose to go in the wrong direction. When I chose to turn away from life. I can think of one instance when I was in my mid-20s, living in New York City. A time when I made some reckless choices that brought with them terrible consequences. My parents could not shield me from these outcomes, but that didn't stop them from driving more than 1,000 miles to be with me. I can only imagine how interminably long that drive must have been. I can only imagine that, as their Isuzu Trooper ferried them northbound, the fervor of my mother's lament intensified with each state line crossing. "Brandon, Brandon...why must you bring such suffering upon yourself? How I long to shield you from it. How it breaks my heart that I cannot."

We can understand my mother's helplessness, but what are we to do with Jesus' apparent helplessness? As God incarnate, could Jesus not have produced a different outcome? Could he not compel our ancestors to say yes to his gift of salvation? Why does he not spare us the suffering that comes with turning away from God and seeking our own will? Is that not what an all-powerful, all-loving God would do? Theologians have grappled with these questions for centuries, and I don't pretend to have the answers. But I do know that when people asked Jesus big questions, instead of offering them answers, very often he offered them a story. So here goes nothing.

My husband Bob and I moved to Boston to be closer to our family, which includes two very young nephews. And while I had expected time with Francis and Oliver to be interesting, I had not anticipated they would serve as a theological laboratory. At 21 months, my younger nephew Oliver is utterly fearless, powered by his newfound ability

to walk and talk. And in recent weeks, he has just begun to walk up and down the stairs. Last week, I watched with great affection as Oliver ambled down the stairs holding the banister in one hand and Bob's hand in the other. Midway through his descent, Oliver froze, turned around, and said, "Where's mama?!" From the top of the stairs, his mother offered reassuring words: "I'm right here Oliver." And he continued his downward trek with newfound boldness.

With my head full of today's Gospel, this exchange between Oliver and his mother turned my gaze toward Oliver's future. To the inevitable day when that invisible but sturdy tether that anchors him to his mother will fall away. This dissolution will be at once necessary for his flourishing *and* the source of inevitable suffering, as his decisions collide with the changes and chances of this world. I pray that each and every time he turns away, he will turn back to the sources of Wisdom and Love in his life. And yet, that question lingers: *why?* Why must his suffering – our suffering – be part of the path? Why must the act of turning away and turning back be part of the human experience? Part of our journey with God?

I am convinced that all the theology classes and Adult Forums in the world will never yield completely satisfying answers.⁹ Indeed, I am fairly certain that on this side of heaven, we'll never resolve the tension that comes with following an all-loving, all-powerful God who abides human suffering. But a few years into this earthly pilgrimage, with almost five decades of turning away from the source of Love, only to turn back again and again, I know this much to be true: ***there is grace in the turning.*** Because

⁹ Reference to the 2025 Lenten Adult Forums at Trinity Church in the City of Boston, "We are God's Plan: The Source of our Meaning and Purpose," offered by the rector, the Rev. Morgan Allen. Among other things, these Forums explored theodicy, the school of theology that seeks to explain a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God who permits evil.

the God “whose glory it is always to have mercy,”¹⁰ the giver of Life, Love incarnate, is always waiting with open arms when we turn back. Ready to “bear us for joy and endless life.”¹¹ Like a mother hen, wings outstretched, to shelter us in her love.

¹⁰ From the Collect of the Day for the Second Sunday in Lent, from the American Book of Common Prayer (1979), 218.

¹¹ A Song of True Motherhood, Julian of Norwich.