

Sermon February 24, 2013 LENT II
Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-6 Luke 13:13-35

"God's Loving Anguish"

We are in the second week of Lent, during which time our eyes are to be focused on Jesus as he makes his way toward the cross and his death in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the center of worship for the Jewish people. The people of Jerusalem, who should have been so attuned to what God was doing for them in Jesus, didn't recognize God... And so, in today's lesson, as Jesus stood over Jerusalem and faced the reality of his coming death, he felt all the pain of the mothering, hovering God who had been so present for the people, even when they did not recognize or acknowledge him. A mother or father's pain over a child or children is probably the deepest pain imaginable. God's pain over God's scattered, stiff-necked (stubborn), misunderstanding children is unimaginably deep. A parent's pain... Many of us know it.

Someone once commented, "Parenthood is a marvelous predicament." So true! For years, Woody and I wanted to have children, desperately going the infertility treatment route even as we worked through adoption processes. We knew that we had a lot of love to give, and we wanted more in our life together than just "couple-hood." Thank God, now we are seasoned parents, recipients of uncountable blessings because of our daughter and son... But we have also been challenged beyond what we ever imagined. For there is much pain, uncertainty and overwhelming powerlessness in even the most blessed of parenting situations. Over the years I have come to appreciate God even more, as God's pain over us - God's children - is more vividly grasped because of my own experiences...

Case in point: I used to love to provide our children a treat of some kind. I enjoyed their delight...All too often, though, one refused to share with the other, and the price of the gift was anguish for all present. I thought of God: God has given me "treat" after treat: good health, a clear mind, orderly emotions, numerous talents and opportunities, a faithful husband, more than enough to live and thrive on... And yet my fists (checkbook, wallet, eyes, and calendar) are often closed as tightly as a three year-old child's as I refuse to share...And I wonder: Does God weep over us as I have wept over my own children?

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem..." We are told that Jesus expressed God's pain over the city; and that Jesus used the image of the mother hen, saying that he wanted to gather the straying children under his wings, to protect and guide and mother them... But the children refused to see what God was doing. So Jesus continued along the way to the cross, to his death.

Like wayward, selfish children, we do not notice God or God's call in our lives, God's need for us to help another or to respond, until perhaps another time...

My husband Woody has told about how when he was growing up in a small town in Alabama the church youth group was the center of social life for him and many of his friends. I share his memories about it: "The youth leaders were a young couple with young children who became our unofficial mascots. Our Saturdays were often spent with the group out water skiing on the Alabama River. As the day wore down we would gather around and listen as the leaders tried to put some sort of religious spin on the otherwise social outing. They never were very good at it, but that was a small price to pay for a day on the river. One afternoon the minister of the church, whose daughter was in the group, came with us. At the close of the day we all looked to him for our "sacred second," as we called it. The minister was a down to earth sort of guy who always seemed to have something interesting to say.

"He began by talking about the shells that lined the water's edge, about how many there were, and how each was unique. He went on to make a short but beautiful talk about God's care in making

each shell, and about how God must care about each one of us. We all sat there amazed by the comparison and the realization that God really does care about me. (The only time any of us had noticed those shells before was when they had cut our feet.)

"After a few moments of silence one of the kids asked the pastor, 'How is it that you always see God in things, and that when you tell of an experience in a sermon it is always an experience in which God is there? Does God follow you around because you are a minister or do you just make these stories up?'

"In response, the minister said something that hit home with many of us, and we often referred to it later. He said, 'God is involved in everything we do, but unless we take the time to look we will miss God.'" For a long time afterwards, until it became kind of a joke among us; whenever anything good, bad or indifferent happened, we would ask each another, 'Is God here? How is God involved in this?'" (from Woody Eddins, edited by FTE)

What does it take for us, God's children, to recognize God and our need for God in our lives?

There's an old story about a drowning boy who was struggling in the water. His mother, who could not swim, was on the shore, watching in terror. Beside her stood a strong man, who watched but seemed almost unconcerned about the boy. Again and again the panicking woman begged the man to save her child, but he made no move. Soon the desperate struggles of the boy began to lessen. He was losing strength and becoming totally helpless. At once the man leaped into the water and brought the boy to safety. "Why did you wait so long?" asked the now grateful mother. "Ma'am, I could not save him as long as he struggled. He would have dragged us both to certain death. But when he grew weak and ceased to struggle, then it was easy for me to save him." (Source unknown)

The imagery of splashing around going nowhere, trying to save oneself speaks to me. Many times I have felt that I was getting nowhere, as though I were drowning in a swamp or raging waters. I kept trying harder and harder--often pushing away the very people who could help me. The same dynamic was going on in Jesus' day as the people--floundering in their efforts to find a secure and meaningful life--pushed Jesus aside, rejecting the Way he tried to offer them. Loving, not hating. Forgiving, not getting even. Trusting in God instead of rat-racing around.

Remember that it was the ones with nothing left to lose who were the ones open to Jesus' teachings. The ones who had given up - the lepers, the blind, those who knew themselves to be sinners - found reason to hope. But those who kept thinking themselves to be powerful rejected Jesus. --The Pharisees pushed Jesus aside because they were offended by his teachings; they saw him as a threat to their religious tradition of rules and rituals. - Herod, the paranoid king, lashed out at Jesus because he was afraid that this Jesus would threaten his privileged position and power. - Others were unable to accept Jesus because he came to seek and to save people they did not like or approve - he associated with real sinners; or they wanted him to oust the occupying Romans and set up a militarily strong Israel, which he did not do. So they pushed Jesus out of their lives.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How I yearn to gather you under the shelter of my wings!" But the parent is pushed away...The Gift is not received, or the gift is hoarded and never shared, and the tears flow for the sake of the child.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem" - Each one of us is Jerusalem... Only when we can "let go and let God" can we ever really "get our act together." The longer we resist, the further from life we drift. Far too many people have drowned and died spiritually and yet still move from day to day behind a mask that believes life begins just beyond the next desolate hill. If I can do this, or get that, or make it to here, I'll have it made.... The good news is that God, who loves us even more than the best parent,

and who knows every good and bad thing about us, does not give up on us. God stays with us, through all our rejections and flailings and blindnesses, to help us when we finally will accept God's help. God yearns for God's children to be gathered under God's protection, as a mother hen gathers her brood...

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem..." Is God here? How is God involved in what is happening today? Where is God weeping over our refusal to seek God's presence and to be confronted by God's need of us? How is God involved in what is happening in your life? Can you see the hand of God at work as you try to deal with somebody who is making you miserable? Is God's presence real for you when you have to make hard decisions or you find yourself having made a really bad choice? Can you feel God's comfort when you are sad or lonely or really discouraged in your life?

A story: "There was once a little fish who swam up to his mother one day and asked, 'Mom, what is this water that I hear everybody talking about?' 'Silly fish,' replied the mother, 'The water is all around you, it is what you live in, it is all around you and within you, and it gives you life.' Then the mother fish added, 'If you really want to know what water is, then go to the top of the pond and stick your gills out of the water for awhile, and you will learn what water is.'

Near the pond lived a herd of deer. One day the fawn said to her father, 'Daddy, what is this air that I hear so much about?' 'Silly little deer,' said the big buck, 'The air is all around you and within you. Air gives you life. If you want to find out what air is, then go and stick your head in the stream and you will discover what air is.'

On the other side of the pond there was a village, and in that village there lived a young man who was starting his spiritual journey. After having difficulty figuring out his life he went to the old wise man of the village and asked, 'Holy man, what is this God I hear so much about?'" (pause)

What is this God we hear and talk so much about? Who is this God for us? Who are we for this God?

Let us keep these questions alive in our hearts as we proceed through Lent. And let us not forget the image of Jesus expressing God's anguish as the people simply would not be gathered in God's love; and the image of God present through all our years and moments, waiting for us to realize and trust that God really is with us. May we offer reasons to rejoice to our loving, hovering God as we respond to God and to each other. And may we rejoice in our Savior who is here, right now, to show us the way to life! Amen.