



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Most Beautiful City in the World

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 13, 2022

The Second Sunday of Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

Back when I was a college student, I spent some time traveling around Europe. I visited many of the major European capitals—London, Paris, Rome, Athens—and I was incredibly impressed by the magnificence of all of these cities, each with its own particular beauty and character. As I was making my way through Europe from west to east, I met a man from Australia who was traveling around the world from east to west. He'd already been through parts of Asia and the Middle East, and we compared notes. We shared stories about all the places we'd visited, and he told me that the most beautiful city in the world was Jerusalem.

I had never been to Jerusalem, and, honestly, I had a hard time believing that it could in any way hold a candle to cities like Paris or Venice or even New York, with its spectacular skyline. I envisioned Jerusalem as just a pile of old stones—historically and religiously important, of course—but not beautiful. So I asked him to explain what he meant. He told me that there was just something about Jerusalem—something magical about it—and he told me I should make a point of going there. Well, I didn't make it to Jerusalem on that trip, but I never forgot what he told me.

It wasn't until many years later, just three years ago, in fact, that I finally made it to Jerusalem, when my wife Debra and I traveled there for a family wedding. I was excited about our trip for many reasons, but one was the memory of what that Australian man had told me so many years ago. Jerusalem is the most beautiful city in the world. I just hoped I wouldn't be disappointed when I finally got there.

When we arrived, Debra and I climbed up to a spot just outside the walls of the Old City near the Jaffa Gate. I took a moment to look around at the view, to gaze at the modern city that has grown up around the ancient one. And then I turned to face those ancient stone walls, to walk through the gate; and I began to cry.

What brought on those tears? There was nothing particularly beautiful about those old stones, nothing so extraordinary about the view. It wasn't any superficial beauty that moved me; it was the story those stones tell: a story of hope and struggle, conquest and loss, that continues to this day. The story of faithful pilgrims—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—who over thousands of years have journeyed to that sacred place to worship and pray. The story of the people who have lived and worked and died within those walls. And the story of the One who rode through its gates on a donkey and was nailed to a Cross on a hill nearby.

The experience of this visit came to mind as I read our Gospel passage for today, as Jesus laments his beloved city: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” It’s an expression of both profound love and heartbreaking grief for this city and its people, a city that is at the center of Jesus’ life, and a place to which he seems to be inexorably drawn with an almost magnetic pull.

We meet him today on the road to Jerusalem. He’s been teaching in towns and villages in Galilee and he’s drawing big crowds. The Pharisees come to warn him that Herod, the ruler of that region, wants to kill him. He’d better get out of Galilee, they say.

But Jesus already knows he needs to move on, not because he’s fleeing Herod, but because it’s God’s will for him to go to Jerusalem, God’s holy city. “I *must* be on my way,” he tells them. The road to Jerusalem has been his path since the day he was born. It’s the place where he was presented to God as an infant, where at the age of twelve, he was discovered by his parents after going missing for three days. Now, as he gets closer and closer to the city, the tension builds. We know what awaits him there. He knows, too. And yet he sets his face toward that place, compelled to go, yearning to be there, even though it is his destiny to die there.

Drawing on the language of the psalms, he expresses both love and foreboding in his desire to gather God’s children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings—a beautifully tender metaphor that emphasizes his motherly care and protection. The mothering God who offers refuge in the shadow of her wings, who nurtures and cares for her children, protects them from danger, and sacrifices her own life to save them. They simply have to be willing to accept her love.

Opposing him is Herod, whom Jesus calls “that fox,” dangerous, cunning, and sly, and a voracious predator who will eat pretty much anything—and who has a particular taste for domestic poultry. In the world of Herod the fox, the mother hen is a sitting duck.

There are plenty of foxes in the world today. Those who feel so threatened by rivals that they would rather kill and destroy than build and create. We are seeing this right now in cities like Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Kyiv. We know evil is at work when the invaders choose to bomb the homes of innocent civilians and maternity hospitals filled with pregnant women and newborn babies

Many of you have been asking, what can we do? What is the Christian response to this brutality? I can’t tell you how to respond for yourself. You may be called to march or protest or boycott or speak out. You may want to give money to organizations on the ground in Ukraine, or perhaps you feel moved to offer aid to refugees. However you choose to respond to this crisis, the answer is simple: the Christian response is love. We are called to follow the example of Jesus; and, based on today’s Gospel reading, that means offering care and protection to those in need with humility, courage, and sacrifice. There are plenty of foxes in the world. What we need are more mother hens.

The ancient stones of Jerusalem tell a sacred story. The ruins of Mariupol and Kharkiv tell a story, too, that is every bit as profound, every bit as sacred. They tell the stories of lives lived and lives lost, the stories of refugees fleeing to safety, of those that have stayed behind to fight, and those who have stayed behind because they simply could not bring themselves to leave. God has not abandoned those cities. Jesus the mother hen is working there now.

Fr. Andriy Zelinsky is Chief Chaplain of the Greek Catholic Church. He has been serving alongside Ukrainian soldiers for three years. Fr. Zelinsky says his job is to “lean heaven toward the soldiers,” so they can preserve their humanity in the chaos of war, “lean heaven” toward them so they can hold on to their capacity to choose good.*

Jesus is on the road to God's holy city. On this second Sunday in Lent, we are on that road with him. He is calling God's people to take refuge under her wings, and calling us to offer that same comfort and protection to those who are in any kind of danger. God's loving care and protection is there for all, if we choose to accept it.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem. The most beautiful city in the world. When I finally made it there after all those years, I discovered that the beauty of the city runs deeper than its architecture or ancient stones. Its beauty—and its holiness—is held in the lives and prayers, the hopes and dreams of its people. And so, in that respect, every city is the most beautiful city in the world.

Amen

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* Fr. Andriy Zelinskyy Interview with Nick Shifrin, PBS Newshour, March 11, 2022. (<https://www.pbs.org/video/march-11-2022-pbs-newshour-full-episode-1646998977/>)