

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
The Second Sunday of Lent Year C
February 21, 2016

The sun followed us and beat down upon us all day. Our eyes were opened to wonders beyond our imagination. Boulders and living water and rock structures called cairns showing us the way forward piqued our interest as we carefully picked our path to the head of Box Canyon. Our bodies were stretched and pulled in ways previously unimaginable by the arrangement of the rocks strewn on the canyon bed, their pattern formed by the spring deluge. We paused for moments of reflection and rest. We experienced joy and challenge and a sense of God sprung up among us, refreshing and unexpected.

We had made it to the head of the canyon and were now returning to our home for the week, our cottages at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico.

We were tired after the strenuous hike, so our conversation on our return was soft and sparse. We allowed stretches of space to come between us, as we knew our destination and were confident we would get there. We gulped the remaining drops of water in our canteens and chose the most direct path through the opening of the canyon, wading through the inner most stream of water.

Suddenly, someone exclaimed, "Look behind you!" And there it was. The gathering of the legendary afternoon violent thunderstorm, which regularly inhabited this dramatic and spare landscape. The dark clouds enveloped the sky; I'm not sure when I've seen such blackness appear so suddenly. We began to quicken our pace. Within moments, the thunder began and the lightning strikes crackled with an intensity which turned our quickened pace into a sprint. Our minds raced. Could we remember an outcrop of rocks we could take shelter under? Would it be safe to sit beneath one of the trees that spotted the desert landscape?

We knew the only answer that made sense. We needed to get to this hut made out of logs, which must have been built for exactly this purpose, providing shelter from a violent storm, which we had seen near the trailhead. The rain began. The hail followed. What had been dry cracked land was transformed into a gushing deluge, right before our eyes.

Where was the hut? "I swear it must be right around that bend!" we mumbled over and over again. We ran some more. Faster. Out of breath. We cast our eyes toward the horizon to see any glimpse of our protection. Finally it was there. Just a little bit more. We sprinted and flew into the enclosure, breathing hard, grateful for our refuge in the midst of this storm.

I know what it feels like to yearn for refuge. Whether it involves sprinting to take shelter in a protective hut to escape the ferocious hail, or my heart's straining to dive under God's

protective wings of love to escape the raging storms of my life. I know what feels like to yearn for refuge. The idea of being gathered by Jesus as a mother hen gathers her brood can be very appealing.

We all need a refuge when our uncertainty and anxiety become our roommates, when sorrows sweep through our houses, or when the world around us seems to be falling apart. We need a safe place to go, a safe place in which we can breathe amidst these storms. We can reconnect to our spiritual selves and the God to whom we turn in times of trouble. When I remember these times of mad running toward God's protection, to whom I have deliberately turned my heart, when I have joyfully and purposefully listened for God's pull upon my heart and dedicated myself to the work of God, I think, "Oh Jesus, you're not talking to me in today's gospel!"

However, when I took the time to contemplate Jesus' words and allow the sting of his utter disappointment in those who would not be gathered into the community of believers, my perspective changed.

"Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

I carried these words of the anguish and lament of Jesus around in my heart. I allowed the sharp edges of what sounds like harsh judgment upon me and all others who have resisted the claim of Jesus upon our hearts, on any or all of our waking days, to pierce my soul. My own heart sank with the knowledge that my absence from God, my refusal to bend at all times to God's will, my putting limits on what I was willing to sacrifice and give up for God, had grieved the very heart of God.

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

I remembered the years in my 20's when I didn't go to church at all. This memory blazed like fire in my mind and I felt Jesus' disdain. I was not willing to be gathered under the wings of Christ's love.

I remembered the times when I tossed into the offering plate whatever I had at the moment, without any real intention around giving for God's work in the world, for it didn't even occur to me that it would actually matter to God what I gave, that God was actually counting on my resources to carry on Jesus' work, and I blushed with chagrin.

I remembered the times when I went to church on Sunday but it wasn't even part of my imagination that I should be working to connect Sunday to every other day of the week and thought how saddened the heart of God must have been by my ignorance.

These startling memories made me wonder, “Has the way I have chosen to live my life caused Jesus to have something more to bear on the cross? If being absent from church or from God at times, choosing to begin my day, not in prayer and meditation, but with responding to emails, holding onto a tiny piece of self-righteous anger because sometimes it just feels good, further burdened Jesus?”

We are called into hard Lenten work today, to comprehend that what we have done or what we not have done has actually grieved the heart of God. For, if we believe in an incarnate God, we must believe that God is affected immediately and intimately by what we do or chose not to do, and by what we are or by who choose not to be. If we believe that our goodness pleases God, then we have to believe that our times of refusal to be gathered by Jesus’ love grieve God as well.

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Perhaps because that harsh knowledge can be too much to bear, I begin listing in my head the times when in fact I did allow Jesus to be my refuge, when I did commit myself to handing my life over to God, when I did allow Jesus’ love to mold my heart and open the gates for compassion to flood in and filled the cracks produced by fear.

And I was even able to construct rationalizations for when I fled from under the wings of Christ’s love: the costs were too high, it didn’t make sense, it wouldn’t really matter to God. Jesus must surely understand.

But I soon came to know that the answer did not lie in shielding my heart from the truth of a life lived running back and forth between times of closeness with God and times of deliberate distance from God, but by finding the invitation to a new life within the checkered truth.

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Because redemption is hard-wired into our relationship with Christ, Jesus never draws us into a place from which we cannot emerge as a new creation. So let’s look for that invitation in today’s gospel.

Joan Chittister reflects on this state of redemption being built into our sinfulness in a book we read this week before meditation. She states that sin is the state of our not being our best selves. She goes on to claim that sin is in the air we breath, and then here’s the most important piece – she states that sin (our separateness from God) is an essential part of our growth.

There it is. There is our path. We look at our true human nature ~ and then we understand God's invitation to use it for good.

We now know that each time we run away from the protective wings of Christ's love into our own self-absorbed areas of life; every time we have darted from the beckoning call of Jesus to come closer; every time we have chosen to cut ourselves off from the communities where Christ can be found, they each contain the opportunities to grow into the fullness of who God desires us to be.

Each time we turn away, there's the invitation to turn back; each time we hide from God to nurse our broken hearts or to fester our wounds indefinitely, there's the invitation to allow Christ to embrace and heal our battered souls; each time we lash out and tear down relationships, there's the invitation to allow compassion to seep through our walls of fear or anger. God would have it no other way. God would use all of us - including our brokenness, unfaithfulness, and deliberate walk alone - and bring us into a new creation.

For Jesus, God's passionate dream, compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather God's human children closer and closer into God's embrace and love. The invitation is always there. That's the bit of Easter we discover during our Lenten journey.

Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw, embrace, include, and welcome God's children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself. Redemption built into our sinfulness.

My soulful reflection this week on the times in my life when I haven't been very attentive to the beckoning of God in my life reinstated in me my deep desire that, rather than Jesus saying of me, **Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!**" grieving God's heart, I want the truth spoken at my baptism, and your baptism to resonate. I want for God to say instead, "You are my beloved. In you, I am well pleased."

Amen.