

Sermon for February 28, 2016 – “Desires”

3rd Sunday of Lent, Year C – Texts: Gen. 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Having passed the devil’s tests in the wilderness in last week’s gospel reading from Luke, Jesus is confronted next with testing that takes on a decidedly more human and communal face. Some friendly Pharisees counsel Jesus to get out of Dodge before the menacing Herod kills him. Herod has already imprisoned and executed John the Baptist and even the less-than-astute can foresee that Jesus will share a similar fate should He linger within Herod’s jurisdiction. Discretion is the better part of valor, says conventional wisdom. Avoid the threat, and live to preach another day. Jesus, himself, sees that Jerusalem, the center and heart of Judaism, the axis around which all of Israel revolves, has turned its back on him. He realizes that a prophet’s death awaits him should He complete His journey there. Self-preservation dictates that He pull up short of the city and ward off the rejection of those who ought most to receive him. Even while Jesus “desires” to save His people, Herod “wants” to kill him and Jerusalem “wills” to refuse rescue.

By employing the same Greek word in all three cases (translated three different ways in English) Luke sums up the conflict Jesus faces as a clash of **desires**. Amid the clamor of this age and the wreckage within the Church’s life, the voice of prudence reverberates within our souls. Our fragile desire to live out the ways of the Kingdom is continually threatened by the desires of others to crush or resist our own. The collision of these desires provokes our stronger, more developed, self-protective reflex. Stay in control we tell ourselves, and live to fight another day. Maintain your distance from the fray, and preserve your dignity. Often our self-preservation appears to be the very opposite of disengagement. Our distance takes the form of engagement, of denunciation and condemnation of the ills we see both inside and outside the Church.

Those of us entrusted with formal authority within the Church and other forms of social capital (meaning, basically, everyone) can use such power to further insulate ourselves by disparaging, or tearing down, those who threaten or stand apart from us. But Jesus demonstrates that the true prophetic word isn’t about distance or denunciation. Jesus doesn’t hurl diatribes. He doesn’t attack people verbally from afar. Nor does He shield himself from their cold-blooded rejection. Quite the opposite. Instead of closing Himself off, He opens himself up wide. He’s like a mother hen spreading her wings for her brood to find shelter from devouring predators. Jesus engages others. He continues to pursue the redemption of those who reject Him even at the risk of making Himself vulnerable. Though misunderstood and rejected, Jesus is undeterred in holding out salvation. Where **our** desire to be faithful to our own calling gets blunted or gets thrown off course by the desires of enemies or even fellow believers, Jesus persists in His. He will continue laboring “**today, tomorrow, and on the third day**” until He finishes His work.

What fuels His desire when all signs point to its fruitlessness? Jesus reveals what steels His will by saying that He “must” be on His way. Divine necessity is the current of God’s desire to redeem running all through Luke’s gospel. And it’s God’s desire, God’s will, that propels Jesus toward the city of Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus’ desire is replenished within His Father’s will.

When Abram’s will falters against the tide of unbelief in our first reading he gets a neat little demonstration of God’s determination. In the ancient rite, the two parties were to walk between slaughtered animals as a solemn promise to uphold their part in the covenant. But Abram sleeps, and the Lord walks alone between the carcasses. God, and God alone, will bear the burden of bringing to completion what He has promised. Divine determination will fuel Abram’s own will to go on.

Paul's words to the Philippians, in our second reading, usher us back into a more recognizable congregational context. Where Jesus laments over the stubbornness and narrow-mindedness of Jerusalem, Paul weeps over the enemies of the cross of Christ. But Paul's lament isn't for the waywardness of the world but that of the **Church**. Is there a greater tragedy than the Church being named an enemy of the cross because she refuses to find shelter within her Savior's vulnerability? Yet Paul goes on, inviting us to do so also, telling us to "**stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.**" So where are we? Are we people whose lives are oriented toward this world, or are our lives oriented **beyond** this world to eternity? What do we actually focus on? What do we seek out? What do we value? What is it we want for ourselves and our families?

It's been said before that people don't talk much about heaven anymore; despite all recent books, it's not really part of any on-going dialogue. In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, written some 70 years ago, C.S. Lewis put it this way: "We are very shy nowadays, of even mentioning heaven. We are afraid of the jeer about 'pie in the sky' and of being told that we are trying to escape from the duty of making a happy world here-and-now into dreams of a happy world elsewhere." "But," Lewis continues, "either there is 'pie in the sky' or there is not. If there is not, then Christianity is false, for this doctrine is woven into its whole fabric. If there is, then this truth, like any other, must be faced...whether it makes us popular or not." Lewis is right; either our primary focus is on this world and its pleasures or it's on heaven and the savior that we await. Either we're guided by God's will or by our own desires. There's no middle ground here.

There's a great book that I read a while back called *Sacred Compass*. There's a passage in it that says "God works within and around us, leading, guiding, and opening the way.. Sometimes when we least expect or feel it. The idea of being led and guided implies movement... And if we're being led or guided, then we must be being led or guided somewhere. The sacred compass shows us that we are on a pilgrimage (there's that word again) to our spiritual true north, God." So...what guides us on our Lenten journey? In which direction are our spiritual compasses pointing?

Friends, hear Jesus' words again from today's gospel reading, hear them as if you were there with him, as He laments what might have been: "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! 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 always picture Jesus almost in tears as He says this. The desire to gather His children but they were not willing! Shame on them we say, how could this be? What's the matter with them, couldn't they see it? How could they not? It's heart-breaking, isn't it? But, are we really any different? Are we able to see and do what the people of Jerusalem in Jesus' time could not? Are we willing to do the work of God as Christ did it? Even if it means changing something about ourselves or our lives? Even if it makes us uncomfortable? Or unpopular with others? Are we willing to follow Jesus' example? Are we willing to do so **despite** the demands it make of us, like giving up certain ways of thinking or doing things? Are we willing to take Jesus seriously? Are we willing to follow Him, even when it might lead us to a cross??? Are we ready to stand firm in the Lord?? Or is there another god to whom (and for whom) we sacrifice?

These are the unavoidable questions that our faith calls us to confront. These are questions we must answer on our Lenten journey. Questions that persist as we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Abraham Lincoln said "Be sure you put your feet in the right place, then stand firm." That's pretty good advice. Let us hold fast to what we have attained. Let us stand firm in the Lord. "**Be on your guard,**" as Paul exhorts the church in Corinth, "**stand firm in the faith...Be courageous; be strong.**"

That too, is solid advice. As I see it, and here's the thing, it's a matter of basic orientation. A matter of **focus**. A matter of **resolve**. Stand firm by looking at Jesus and following **His** example rather than pursuing the things of this world. Stand firm by trusting in Him – instead of the false gods of our culture. Hard? Sure! Impossible? Not really! But the God's truth here, is that against the onslaught of fearsome, earthly desires and temptations our resolve to be faithful endures **only** as it finds its life within God's faithful determination. Our will, our desires, only find their fulfillment as we submit to the Divine will. Only when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, or at least our little corner of it. God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven...why's that sound familiar? Oh that's right, it's in the Lord's Prayer that we recite every week.... If not our favorite prayer, it's certainly the one with which we're most familiar. It's the one most people know by heart. But do we ever really think about what we're saying when we offer that prayer? But do we honestly believe that it's true? We should, but why? Well, because following our own desires tends to get us lost and the decisions (big and small) we make as a result are only portions of our life of pilgrimage, they're **not** the destination – God is!

God is our destination. It is His will that we find our chief end. To glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. We can, therefore, run to be gathered in the arms of Christ. Even as they're held out in love upon the cross... Held out toward a stubborn, resistant people.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.