

“That’s How Much”
Luke 13:31-35; Psalm 27
Lent 2

Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’”

³⁴Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Psalm 27

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

²When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;

he will set me high on a rock.

⁶Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,

and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;

I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,

be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”

Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

¹⁰If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD,

and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

¹²Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,

for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

¹⁴Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

The Sermon

Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim
yarah, Here someone has cast *shalom*, “peace.”ⁱ
Yarah-shalom, Yerushalayim,
The Greeks called it *Hierousalem*;

And Jesus, further on his way to his final appointment in Jerusalem than anyone else realized, stood looking over the city, and said the name three times in a row:

“It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of *Yerushalayim*.
Yerushalayim, *Yerushalayim*, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”

And the drum beat beats for the people who keep rejecting the protector who loves them infinitely more than they can comprehend;

And the drum beats for the savior who will give everything he is and everything he has to save them,

in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem.

Maybe Luke is recording a day when Jesus is in a particularly poetic mood;

or, maybe it's Luke who, as a clear-eyed and level-headed physician, more comfortable with the language of dispassionate, matter-of-fact medical reports, simply cannot find the prose to convey what he sees in Jesus,

and he knows that, of all our hopeless attempts to try to put God into words, poetry is the best of our inadequate options.

And so Jesus stands above the city full of people he loves in spite of themselves, and in the middle of two sentences recites the mournful drumbeat of *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem*.

That's not the only poetry in his soliloquy.

There's the nifty book-ending that matches his statement back at the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth, when after a rush of initial enthusiasm, people were starting to go, "Wait a second, isn't this Joseph's kid?" and he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

Now he's sending a message to Herod that says, "I'm on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem."

And there is the poetic cadence that underscores the undistracted, fearless determination with which he intends to keep seeking out things that are broken in people, and fixing them:

"I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow,
and on the third day I finish my work."

Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day

I must be on my way.”

You hear me, Herod? I’m talking to you. I’m headed to Jerusalem where you will play your part in doing what must be done, but every step of what you could only ever see as my death march, I am going to be scattering seeds of life and hope and peace and strength and grace and mercy.

And if that isn’t clear enough, there are the poetic images in what Jesus says that make perfectly clear what he is doing:

The Pharisees come and say to him,

“You’ve got to get out of here—Herod wants to kill you;”

and Jesus says,

“You go tell that fox what I say,”

and a minute later, he says of himself,

“How I have desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

There is a sharp-fanged, aggressive, bloodthirsty fox in the henhouse,
ready to kill for its own convenience;
hungry to kill for its own survival,

And there is a mother hen, who will protect her brood at all costs,
substituting vulnerability for violence,
letting Herod take up arms
while Jesus offers only the flightless wings of a mother hen.

In the hearings following the 1981 attempt on President Reagan’s life, in which a deranged man with a gun had sprayed bullets as the president was being led to his waiting car,

some senior administrator was giving testimony to the panel, describing the actions that were taken during those intense, horrifying moments when shots rang out.

The official spoke about the actions taken by each of the agents who surrounded the president, and then he came to Agent Tim McCarthy, who, as

others were pushing the president into the car, shielded their actions with his own body.

I was only 13 years old at the time, but I can still hear the voice of that official who was giving testimony as clearly as if it were yesterday, when he stopped and repeated the six words he had just said about Agent Tim McCarthy:

“Stood in the line of fire.”

Mary-Louise Parker is an actor who has written a fantastic memoir presented as a series of letters to various men in her life—some of whom are long gone from this world, some of whom are imaginary, some of whom are yet to appear, some of whom may never appear.

The book is called *Dear Mr. You*, and one of the last chapters is called, “Dear Future Man Who Loves My Daughter.”

She writes,

“Dear Future Man Who Loves My Daughter,

“First of all, show up a bit late. It may be better if she’s seen a little of the opposite of you, and relaxes in your arms only once she realizes you don’t have a gruesome face hiding under the one you first showed her.”

And then she clarifies for emphasis: “Do not have another face hiding...

“Remind her that she is beautiful in every new language you can invent.

“If she has given you children, remind yourself every day of the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth words in this sentence.”

Finally, she writes to the Future Man Who Loves Her Daughter,

“Be a friend to her brother. Be a brother to him...

“My brothers have protected and championed me in ways that she will need also. Should someone slight her honor or threaten her, her brother will get

into the ring and I hope you will join him. I have watched him do this already, and it fills me with pride even when their fight is against me.

“My own brother came to the bus stop with me when he learned I wasn’t getting a seat because of my rampant unpopularity. He stood there, arms folded as though he were barring everyone from entering the rest of their lives if they did not comply with his wish to treat me with respect. He said nothing but stared into the face of every kid on that street corner, promising that their futures were going to remain in question unless they understood. “All conversation stopped. One person snuck a look at another, and his head whipped around to catch both of them looking incredulous in response to his threat.

“Try me, his eyes said. And, Don't think I won't.

“The bus pulled up. I got in line and looked at him still standing there with barely contained galvanic ire. I tried to convey my thanks.

“His eyes said back, *That's how much.*

“I knew how much,” she says, “but it was good to see it. Needless to say, I got a seat.”ⁱⁱ

And I assure you, Mary-Louise Parker never had to identify the question whose answer is “That’s how much.”

How much does God love you? How much do you mean to God?

God wants to give you life more than Herod wants to kill Jesus.

And Jesus will not be distracted from going to Jerusalem, going to the cross, going as a mother hen into the glistening jaws of a rabid fox,

specifically so that you and I will not have to.

That’s how much.

Stood in the line of fire.

That’s how much.

Robert Munsch wrote a book aimed at children back in the 90's where a mother would sing to her son, from his first night in the world,

“I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
as long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.”

When the child was two, when the kid was nine, when the kid was a teenager, she would come into his room at night and sing that same song.

He grew up and left home and she would still sing it to him.

I did not know until recently Robert Munsch's inspiration for that story. On his website, Munsch writes,

“I made that [little lullaby] up after my wife and I had two babies born dead. The song was my song to [them]. For a long time I had it in my head and I couldn't even sing it because every time I tried to sing it I cried.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the book, the child becomes an adult and goes out into the world and gets his own family and home. He visits his mother one night when she is very old and very sick, and she tries, but she can't sing that song anymore. So he sings it to her, and eventually goes home, lifts his baby daughter out of her crib, and sings,

“I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
as long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.”^{iv}

Barbara Chalfant is the associate presbyter for mission in the Presbytery of West Virginia. It was in yesterday's entry, February 20, in the Presbyterian Mission Yearbook, that she had this entry:

“When my father was born in Qingdao, China, Grandmother had a hard time breast-feeding, and Dad was losing weight. So a message went to the missionaries to the south that the babies up north needed milk. Apparently all food that the American missionaries ate came from the U.S. because they

did not know which food was safe and which was not. Food had to be ordered 18 months ahead of need because of shipping time. Obviously one does not anticipate the birth of a baby 18 months ahead.

“So, the children of the south gave up their milk for the babies of the north.” Barbara Chalfant says, “It is a story I had heard again and again during my childhood.

“Just a couple of years ago,” she said, “while spending time with Mom at Sunnyside, one of our Presbyterian homes in Harrisonburg, Virginia, I joined her for dinner with a bunch of others in the dining room...As the server took orders, there was a woman on the other side of the table from me who ordered a glass of milk. Someone made a joke about wine vs. milk and she said, ‘When I was a kid in China we did not have milk. We sent our milk north for the babies. Ever since then I have loved having milk with my dinner.’ I immediately got out of my seat, went around the table, grabbed her hand and said, “Thank you! I want you to know that because you gave away your milk, I am here.”^v

The children—and the parents of those children—gave up their milk so that even smaller children whom it would be a miracle if they ever met could have some.

That’s how much.

How much have I appreciated what you did for my Dad when he was an infant? How much have I wanted, longed for, dreamed about this moment, when I could personally, physically, eye to eye, say thank you to someone who did that, a long lifetime ago on the other side of the world?

As much as the Herods of the world want to take your life away,
to make your insistent, self-sacrificing kindness go away,
to make you and your intrusive demands for justice and mercy go away,
to make the liberating, inspiring example that you set for others go away,
to make the responsibility that we all have to one another go away,

As much as Herod wants to kill,

That is not even one hundredth as much as God wants to give you life,
and protect your life,

and make your life abundant with *real* life
so that you will make others' lives abundant with life.

And the Almighty, vulnerable God will walk into the jaws of death to give that to you.

I believe that we will see the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
in this land, in this life:

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
Be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*

Jesus said to them, "You go and tell that fox for me,
'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures
today and tomorrow,
and on the third day, I will finish my work.

That's how much.

Let us pray.

Prayers of the People

Let us have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus
as we pray for the world he came to save,
saying: Have mercy, O God; **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the church . . .
Transform our shame into your glory.
Help us to live as citizens of heaven,
watching for the coming of our Savior.
Have mercy, O God; **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the world . . .
Show your compassion to the nations.
Give shelter to the poor and oppressed
as a hen gathers her young under her wing.
Have mercy, O God; **hear our prayer.**

We pray for this community . . .
Put an end to the violence among us.
Let your goodness and grace be known
in the land of the living.
Have mercy, O God; **hear our prayer.**

We pray for loved ones . . .
Be the light and the salvation
of all who are suffering this day.
Let their hearts take courage in you.
Have mercy, O God; **hear our prayer.**

As we pour out our hearts in prayer, O God,
lead us to pour out our lives in service to you—
ever seeking your will, ever following your way;
all in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**^{vi}

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ⁱ www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Jerusalem

ⁱⁱ Parker, Mary-Louise (2015-11-10). *Dear Mr. You*. Scribner. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://robertmunsch.com/book/love-you-forever>. Retrieved 2-20-16.

^{iv} Robert Munsch, *Love You Forever*. Firefly Books, 1995.

^v Barbara Chalfant (Associate Presbyter for Mission, Presbytery of West Virginia), “Find Inspiration in a Glass of Milk.” Presbyterian Mission Yearbook 2016 (www.presbyterianmission.org/yearbook/february-20/).

^{vi} From the PC(USA) resource *Call to Worship*. David Gambrell, ed.