

2 Lent, Year C
February 28, 2010
Saint Ann's, Old Lyme

May what is spoken here, and what is heard, be spoken and heard in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My father was a lovely person, really, gentle, kindhearted, and generally without a mean thought in him. As a result, while he could enjoy a good prank, as long as it wasn't at someone else's expense, he never would have been the instigator of a prank. He really was a lovely person.

I, on the other hand, take after my mother, for whom no prank was resistible. And I discovered that part of my heritage one Sunday afternoon in December many, many years ago. I was living at that time in an apartment that was located, quite literally, above a liquor store. When I first moved in, I had been a little apprehensive about living there, but it was really quite sedate, since state law required liquor stores to close not later than 8:00 p.m.. During the season right before Christmas, I felt especially secure because the local police, not surprisingly, kept a very close watch on any unfamiliar cars emerging from the driveway late in the evening. I'm sure they were guarding against theft or vandalism, and were, no doubt, on high alert for such possibilities at that particular time of year.

Well, one evening, during the pre-Christmas season, I had been out to dinner with a friend. After he dropped me off, he pulled out of the driveway, and the minute he hit the street, the police pulled him over. And of course they quizzed him about just what it might be that had him at that particular place at that particular time. Well, he told them who he was and who I was, and they searched his car (and found nothing), and then they gave me a call to verify his story. As you might imagine, I was a little unnerved to hear from the police, and I was happy to verify my friend's innocence.

But I also have to admit that it did cross my mind – briefly - to tell the police that I'd never heard of this character. Later that week, I was speaking to my parents, and I was relating that little episode. I got to the place where the police had called to ask about this fellow, and before I could even finish my sentence, my mother burst in: “you told them you've never heard of this character”. I really am my mother's child.

I always think of that little incident whenever I encounter this part of the Gospel according to Luke appointed for today. Just before the passage that we have just heard, Jesus had been teaching in a village, and he told the people: “when once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then in reply he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ He will say, in essence, ‘I never heard of you.’”

But unlike the little episode many years ago here in Connecticut, this is different. The story about my friend was silly, and it had a happy and harmless ending. It's very different, isn't it, when Jesus threatens to deny he ever knew us. This part of Luke is disquieting, at best, and terribly disturbing, at worst, especially since it's about ultimate things, matters, literally, of life and death – eternal life and death. It's not silly and harmless; instead, it feels ominous, and final.

And it's more than a little frightening to contemplate that God might disavow any knowledge of us - in essence, that God might forsake us. It's also no fun to realize that if that happened, it would be our own fault. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus went on to lament, ... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, [but] you were not willing! "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus lamented. ... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, [but] you were not willing! Where, in the midst of all that, is the Good News?

Well, it may well be that in the midst of this disturbing story the key to our hope is that Jesus lamented. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem,' Jesus lamented. To be sure, his are words of anger, and frustration, but they're also words of sorrow, of lament. And you don't waste time 'lamenting' something if you don't care about it. A lament is born of love. That lament was born of love; Jesus doesn't want to say, 'I've never heard of you!'. What's more, the story doesn't end with anger, and frustration, or even sorrow. The story ends with hope.

The story doesn't end with Jesus saying, "You will not see me again.". The story ends with Jesus saying, "You will not see me until ... you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" The story ends with the word of forgiveness to all who rely on God for the outcome of the story.

Jesus doesn't deny that we sin. That's what the lament is all about. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... killing and stoning'. Neither does Jesus deny the consequences. 'You will not see me again.' There is no turning to God without exposing our sins and facing the consequences. But there is also no turning to God without finding forgiveness. The repentant heart will always encounter God's forgiveness. Jesus has promised - and sealed that promise with his blood - that we can see him - every time we turn to him and exclaim: 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest! Amen.

The Rev. Nancy Miller