

Maybe it's just me being a bit cynical, but when I get warnings like this from people like the Pharisees, I'm a bit loathe to take it very seriously. It usually comes in the form of, "a lot of people are saying..." or "I heard it through the grapevine..." sorts of statements. It's disguised as a well-meaning warning, but it is usually only a disguise. Jesus never seems very concerned about Herod, which is unusual given his relationship with John the Baptist, to whom Herod was actually quite dangerous. But Jesus knows on a visceral level that his destiny is in Jerusalem, and so the petty "warning" of these Pharisees rings hollow. Herod is a nuisance, but not the real problem. In fact, you can see echoes of this unconcern with worldly power even in his interaction with Pilate and by extension Caesar and Rome. None of that is really the problem.

Jerusalem is the problem. And those Pharisees represent Jerusalem more than Herod, they represent the people who are afraid of the truth, because the truth is disruptive and challenging to their safe little world. They are the ones who want Jesus gone because he is upsetting the status quo. The crowds are getting behind Jesus because he's offering them a different idea. He is telling them, just in verse 30, that the last will be first and the first will be last, that's good news to everybody but the people who are first. That's why it's the people on the top of the pyramid that end up wanting to kill Jesus. Notably, Herod is not one of those people, Jesus doesn't ever threaten Herod. Herod eventually gets his shot at Jesus but doesn't take it, and doesn't even seem to want it. Jesus doesn't really threaten Pilate. Speaking for Rome, Pilate finds no act of treason or sedition, and would just as soon set Jesus free.

Politically, and legally, he is not guilty. To the religious types, however, he is guilty as sin. Jerusalem is the Holy City, to this day the significance of Jerusalem to all of the Abrahamic faiths is something we need to understand at a deep level. If it was just another city there wouldn't be so much turmoil over to whom it belongs. Jerusalem represents something bigger than just a geographic place, it is an idea, a hopeful dream of a place where God dwells. Because of the power of this idea, it is vulnerable to becoming an idol, an idol of astonishing power and magnitude.

Jesus' lament for Jerusalem is not just about the city in Judah, it is about the people who are supposed to rely on God and trust the covenant, but who have decided to do things for themselves. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Have you ever seen that happen? If you've never spent time around chickens, maybe not, but it is actually a remarkable thing to see. Chickens are generally pretty unpleasant animals, they peck each other, they fight and scratch for everything and mostly leave you thinking that the best thing about them is when they're fried. But the babies are adorable little balls of yellow fluff, and they are about as defenseless as you can get. Momma hen is almost always near the brood, and if any danger, or even a whiff of danger comes, Momma puffs up to about twice her size and makes a tent out of her wings, the chicks know when this happens that it's time to run to Momma hen, and all the little yellow fluff balls disappear under Momma's wings. If you're going to go after one of those little defenseless fluffs, you are going to deal with Momma's beak and claws.

That's the image Jesus uses, God wanted to protect us like that, but we were not willing. That's right, Jerusalem is us, not just a geographic or a historical place, but people, people who God wants to protect and love, but who were not willing, who wanted to do it on their own. Rather than force them, God "leaves their house to them." In other words, God says, alright, you don't want my protection? You don't want to gather under my wings? Then I guess you get Herod and Caesar and you reject the prophets I send and you strive for things that you cannot possess and you get turned on the wheel.

God has always wanted to offer us something more than we seem to be willing to take. From the very beginning Abram thought small, he thought one kid, just an heir to take over when I go. God takes him out and shows him the vastness of the universe and promises him descendants beyond measure. Abram believes (for a minute) and God takes that little faith (which is going to waver a lot) and calls it enough.

This theme of control is apparently pretty important. It was at the core of the temptations that Satan brought to Jesus last week. Remember all of them sort of amount to a challenge to Jesus to take matters into his own hands, to prove that he is the one with the power. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is a lament for the deep, foundation of human sin: our unwillingness to trust God, and because of that, our stubborn insistence on doing it ourselves. If you have kids, and you've ever been in a hurry, you know that the worst thing you can hear from a toddler in a rushed moment is, "I do it myself!" In most instances it's really good, as a parent to have our little chicks learn to do things for themselves, and there is a certain amount of struggle that is an acceptable cost of having them grow, but there are times when those growing pains might get dangerous and you have to take a bit of risk.

God is willing to take that risk when it comes to a lot of things. This is why, for all of Abram's stumbles and mistakes, he still becomes the father of nations. This is why, when it comes to the Herods and Caesars of the world, Jesus is not particularly concerned even though objectively they were both ridiculously brutal. What Jesus is really about is recovering the hope of the covenant, and that can only happen in Jerusalem, because that is where it is being lost. Not in Rome, not even in Samaria, only in Jerusalem, because they are the ones that are supposed to know and remember that God's ways are higher than our ways and that the Kingdom of God is near. They are supposed to see, from the stories they grew up with, that God is reliable and trustworthy, even when things seem desperate.

The problem is that the Pharisees and the High Priests in Jerusalem think that they are quite successful. From one perspective they are, they have the "wonder of the world" factor going for them. The Temple in Jerusalem was a thing of renown around the world. The people of Israel, the children of Abraham, all looked to them for guidance and hope, and they brought their sacrifices and burnt offerings, along with their money. In the time of Jesus, the Temple was big business, and it's proprietors were quite pleased with that. This scruffy Galilean with his low caste "disciples," and his supposed miracles was nothing but a fly in the ointment. They had working relationships with Herod and Caesar alike, they had a good thing going, why rock the boat?

What Jesus saw were all the people who were suffering for the sake of this shiny temple and the high life of the priests and scribes. He saw the Samaritan woman who was considered unclean by these men and their system, he saw the widow who gave her last pennies to support the temple, he saw the Gentiles who could never hope to approach the god they had sequestered behind the veil in the temple. He knew this was not right, this is not the work of a covenant keeping God; this is not the work of love. Jesus saw, as only Jesus could, that this was not what God intends for his people. This makes him sad, and angry and brings out the lament for Jerusalem.

To me, this is still a glaring question for religious folk to answer: what are you protecting? And from whom are you protecting it? Don't you know that God wants to gather you under her wings like a mother hen gathers her chicks? How are you still so impressed by or afraid of Herod and Caesar? Don't you know they come and go? Jesus pretty clearly calls us to a ministry that precludes doing it ourselves. It requires that we trust God for all things and lean not on our own understanding. There are abundant

examples of where the church has catastrophically become like Jerusalem: insular, greedy, jealous of our own territory, in love with power and our own ego, protective of our institution even when it is painfully broken and actively injuring many, including the little ones. That all comes from trying to do it ourselves and not trusting God. It is time, maybe it is always time, but right now especially, it is time for us to learn to be willing to be gathered under the wings.