



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Journey to Blood Mountain

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 24, 2013

The Second Sunday in Lent

Based on Luke 13:31-35

One of the thrills of a horror movie is the suspense and dread that it sets up. These movies involve great danger and peril, but they also let us know things that the characters don't. And it is agonizing. "Hey!" the college kids say. "We have an idea. Let's camp out on Blood Mountain." "No! The opening scene of the movie had some dark figure kill some other kids. Don't go up there." "Hmm?" a home alone girl says. "I wonder what's behind this door?" "No! Don't open that door! Can't you hear the music? There's a den of demons in there!" "Oh!" the leads say. "Let's sneak into the run-down place where that janitor murdered all those people 20 years ago." "No! Don't do it! He's still in the house!"

But despite anything we say as witnesses, they do camp on Blood Mountain, they do open the door, they do sleep over at the house, and we watch to see who makes it out alive.

The dread of the horror movie is not a far cry from the dread of Lent—where the lessons we read show Jesus steadily and indomitably making his way toward danger and peril, a Blood Mountain, of sorts. Jerusalem.

We can't warn him, but, gratefully, there are people who do. For one, his frenemies, the Pharisees, warn him. "Don't go up there! Very important people want you dead. You'll die up there. Herod will kill you, just like he did your cousin, John. Don't do it." His true friends warn him, too. "There has to be another way. Any place but Jerusalem."

But Jesus continues on the way to Jerusalem, knowing full well the danger that it holds for him. He calls it, not Blood Mountain, but pretty close: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he laments. "The city that kills the prophets. And stones to death the people who God sends to it." This is a shocking thing to say about the Holy City. For most Jews the Holy City is the greatest city of all, home of God's Temple, the pinnacle of faith in the true God, where God is found most vividly.

But Jesus sees through all the holy hype. Instead, he faces up to the reality that Jerusalem has become a twisted place, not a hive of saints in community, but a den of foxes looking for their next meal. He knows it so well that the first time he sees the city with his own eyes, he weeps.

Last year, I visited the chapel that marks the reputed spot where Jesus wept over Jerusalem. The chapel is fashioned in the shape of a tear, and if you worship within it, there is a clear window behind the altar that overlooks the city from the south, giving you a full view with the ruins of the Temple, front and center. How stunning it must have been for Jesus to first see the majesty of Jerusalem, but then to reflect on its profound corruption and how very likely it would be that the people of that city would destroy him. How many voices within must have been adding to the chorus of voices around him: "Don't do it. Don't go through that gate. There are monsters in there."

But Jesus had a mission. And that mission involved putting his life on the line to show forth the truth of God, to live it, to be the truth of God in a place that had constricted and twisted God into a horror show of misplaced piety, vested interests, collusion with Empire, sacrificial rites, and a narrow, divisive understanding of God that caused so many of the sick and suffering to suffer all the more, especially in spirit. This was a show that would torture and kill to keep playing.

And this is what moves me so deeply: despite this brutal reality, Jesus, step by step, makes his way to Jerusalem to complete his mission, to speak and live the truth of God among not only the blessed and holy, but also among the downtrodden and unclean and disreputable, and among the foxes, speaking and teaching and touching, declaring them loved, declaring them holy, casting out so much poison, healing the sick of mind, body, and spirit, welcoming them to God's Temple, where so many had been denied, and welcoming them to his table.

There were so many times that Jesus could have gone all-in with his ministry. In Nazareth, his hometown, or anywhere in Galilee. But in prayer and discernment, he knew that Jerusalem was the perfect place for his work to be completed. At the heart of the world, in the sight of all. And with a simple, prophetic act of turning over the tables of the money changers in the Temple, he would grind Jerusalem to a halt, forcing the issue, forcing the city to bare its fangs for all to see, so that all might see, not only the truth of God, but the truth of how far from God the world had strayed, even in the Holy City, which would sadly become a place of horror for God's Beloved Son.

And so we draw out the suspense of this journey for a whole season; we make our way with Jesus on the path to Jerusalem, marveling that he doesn't hightail it out of there. We find courage in what Christ did for us so that we are emboldened to live into the truth to make the choices that we need to make. We go on and on about this so that we might be made wise in the light of what Christ did, so that we might not make the same mistakes as those who thought he was a threat, or the mistakes of his friends who fled when they were most needed. We dwell on this difficult story so that we might not be one of the foxes.

We want Christ's firm steps on the path to Jerusalem to rejigger our lives so that we are emboldened to pursue the moral upshot of our own lives, so that we might walk toward our Jerusalem, too, whatever that may entail.

What it entails is us looking less like foxes and more like chickens, the image Jesus much prefers for us. Foxes raid the hen house for a meal, they feed on prey using their teeth and claws. But chickens wait. They rely on the daily grain that their keeper provides.

As Jesus said, he wishes he could lead us from the way of the fox to, instead, gather under God like little baby chicks under the wings of a hen, that mother hen that puts her life on the line for us; and when the foxes come, she loves us to the end, giving the foxes their fill, giving us chicks time to scatter, so that we chicks can live to do the same someday to chicks of our own.

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