

At the 10:30 am service on February 28, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Philippians 3:17-4:1 and Luke 13:31-35.

### **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem”**

Cities have reputations. When I grew up in South Africa it was told that the biggest city, Johannesburg, was built on gold, was rich and crime-ridden.

Film director Nora Ephron names Washington DC's reputation. She writes: “Some people think it's terrible that Washington doesn't work, but...it's wonderful, because if it worked, something might actually be accomplished and then we'd really be in bad shape.”

Everyone likes to bash New York City. Singer Madonna has a good one: “I miss New York. I still love how people talk to you on the street - just assault you and tell you what they think of your jacket.” Journalist Mignon McLaughlin states: “A car is useless in New York, essential everywhere else. The same with good manners.” When I lived there the disenchanted said: “New York is a nice place to be from.” The self-affirming say: “When you leave New York, you ain't goin' nowhere.”

Mark Twain has reputations for three cities: “In Boston they ask, how much does he know? In New York, how much is he worth? In Philadelphia, who were his parents?” American short story writer Dorothy Parker said that Los Angeles is 72 suburbs in search of a city.

The gospel text tells us what Jesus thought of Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” According to Jesus and presumably a few others at the time, Jerusalem had the reputation of killing and stoning those who threatened their power systems.

*The Martyrdom of Isaiah*, a work from the first century CE pseudepigrapha (which is like reading the newspaper of the day), asserts that the king Manasseh had the prophet Isaiah sawed in half – a legend found in the Talmud and other early Jewish works.

Kings lived in the City of David, Jerusalem. Jeremiah attests to the reception that Uriah received from King Jehoiakim when the prophet dared to speak out against the kingdom of Judah: “He struck him down with the sword and threw his dead body into the burial place of the common people,” writes Jeremiah (26:23). Jeremiah himself was thrown into a muddy cistern for his prophetic efforts.

Jesus addresses the city as if it's a person. And the person has a reputation. By addressing the city so, he is actually expressing concern for the overall culture of the city just like we would be concerned about the culture of our cities in the Bay Area.

It's interesting to note what Jesus says after “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”

He says: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” This mirrors what is stated in the

opening section of the text. Jesus is healing people from various diseases and oppressions, stated in the language of the day.

“At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ He 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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.’”

The irony is that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he’s not making friends and influencing people by calling Herod a “fox.” In that day, a fox was sly, unprincipled, destructive and possibly unclean (called a jackal in Jewish dietary laws). The “fox” lived in Jerusalem and he set the tone for the city.

The king was Herod Antipas, a Tetrarch (a fourth of a king). He was threatened by Jesus’ claims of God’s kingdom in and among the people. The people perceived Jesus as the new king and he was now on his way to Jerusalem to be hailed as such. As Martin Luther King Jr., marched on Washington so Jesus marched onto to Jerusalem. Like MLK, Jesus sensed that his mission could end in death. But like MLK he marched on. That’s the Lenten journey, but how on earth does this over-the-top story about a city killing and stoning prophets relate to us in our day and context? One can see this happening in some parts of the world but surely not in the USA.

As I listened to Jesus’ lament, I felt most acutely his concern for the city. When one laments over something it generally means that one is mourning a loss: a former beauty, brightness and security much like people mourn the loss of the suburbs, towns, streets of their youth. When one laments a city as Jesus does, one is sorry for what the city has become and there is an underlying desire to have it regain a former splendor.

How do we lament our cities and how do we wish for their restoration if we did lament them? Cities are complicated entities, especially the bigger ones like Washington DC, New York and San Francisco. They are made up of residents, merchants, businesses, civil service personnel, politicians, workers in every field and the arts. It’s a web of relationships everyone connected in some way. A corporation might have its head office elsewhere but it depends on the city in which it sits for incentives and the city needs it there for revenue and employment.

They all make up the culture of the city and by and large we celebrate the relationship. There is however grounds for lament. A resident of Jacksonville, Florida, told me that he was fired from his job at a large corporation with its beautiful buildings on the river because they heard he went on a peace march. The company had contracts with the military.

Chevron in Richmond employs a neighbor on my floor and has employed members of this church and yet Chevron has an uneasy relationship with the City of Richmond. Many lament their presence. And yet we all drive cars and depend on refineries like Chevron. Nothing is easy and simple.

The last thing I want to do is knock cities or impede stable and solid growth of our cities. Cities need to be healthy economically. But like Jesus, I am concerned about our cities and our world.

Oakland, Oakland: The other troubled city in the Bay Area with the disclosure this week that two suburbs in the hills were given city-sanctioned breaks for parking violations, breaks not given to residents and businesses in the “flatlands.” At least the city has offered to refund the fines for the months in question.

The gospel passage today ends with the words: “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.” Jesus wants to be acknowledged in our cities. In other words, he wants his values acknowledged in our cities. He is concerned about Jerusalem, Larkspur, Corte Madera (a town), Berkeley, San Francisco, Washington DC, New York and Johannesburg. God wants us to have economically thriving cities and world but God wants to see justice, peace and compassion in the marketplace.

Jesus is concerned about injustice in our cities and desires healing:

- Go and tell *that fox* for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow...

He wants the best for our cities:

- How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...?

And he wants cities to be welcoming places for all. He represents all people.

- 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.” In other words, you are blessed when you affirm my values.

Whatever city we find ourselves in – some of us belong to other cities in the Bay Area – we are called to be God’s people there. This sermon is meant for everyone in the city – firefighters, police, city council members, parks personnel, merchants and bankers, designers, artists, grocery store personnel, fitness trainers, churches, political representatives and residents. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem” means everybody.

On this second Sunday of Lent we are still on the path with Jesus as he treks to Jerusalem. It is wonderful listening to him on the way and sad to see him heading for the cross – in Jerusalem!