

“Desolate Places”

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Luke Chapter 13:31-35

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“Jerusalem, 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 hen gather her brood under her wings -- and you are not willing!”

If you have been in love for a while, or if you just love someone, there are moments in that relationship (I hope) that the holder of your heart will do something that can make you fall in love all over again. That is the reaction I had as I prepared to give this sermon this morning.

After considering the scripture, I felt that I renewed my love for Christ once more. Because, the Jesus that Luke presents to us this morning is a “no nonsense,” but loving. Jesus. We see a Jesus of accountability, love, and mercy.

Through Lent, we will be following Jesus all the way to the cross. This is the time to consider hard truths, to reflect on difficult questions, to open our hearts in vulnerability, and to look for the path to faithfulness. And, here in our way to Jerusalem, we are invited to take a look at the obstacles that may be obstructing our relationship with God.

And this time, we have a “Jesus vs. Herod” moment. Herod Antipas was a ruthless leader that lead a life of corruption and injustice. The response of Jesus to Herod’s threat was - “you tell that fox that I will continue to do my mission, because he cannot kill me.”

It is significant that we see a Jesus who stood up with relentless determination, because, at the same time, we are challenged to stand firm for the sake of the gospel. But, Jesus turns to Jerusalem with lament and says, “Look, your house is left you.” Other versions have included “your house has been left to you desolate.” From the greek word *érēmos*: an uncultivated, unpopulated place, because you did not heed to the care of God.

The word *house* in both the Old and New Testament is used to describe not only structures for families and individuals. Here in America, we have seen multitudes of what perhaps we can describe as desolate houses:

- During the recent foreclosure crisis, we watched in awe, how complete neighborhoods were vacated and left uninhabited. Individuals and families were losing their homes, and they found themselves displaced, hopeless, and in many occasions, homeless.
- Communities suffered from increased crime, leaving houses vulnerable to thieves who would strip those whom of anything left that was valuable, such as copper wire or any appliances, even fixtures like toilets and sinks.
- Homeowners were vulnerable to financial scams and predatory lending, because an environment of “foreclosure rescue” was ensued as a response to the crisis, and many fell to the scams.
- Unfortunate and perhaps unintended victims of the foreclosure crisis was children and youth. Their lives were often completely altered by moving around and losing friends, teachers, and social networks. And the stress of the parents trickled down to the children, leaving them vulnerable to an emotional burden they should not bear.
- Thousands of people, as high as 76% of those displaced homeowners, moved in with family and friends. Others moved to emergency shelters, and others just moved to the street.
- In LA and Arizona, tent cities of sometimes more than 200 displaced tenants emerged.¹

After a while, unfortunately, we were almost getting used to seeing the images of “desolate houses” or “desolate places” in the media, or even in some neighborhoods—depending on where we were. Desolation was all too tangible.

This issue is almost forgotten for some of us here in Connecticut, because, in comparison to other states, the impact of the downturn of the housing market was less severe for us.

¹ *Seven Ways Foreclosures Impact Communities*, Christine Vidmar, NeighborWorks America, www.nw.org/neighborworksprogs/foreclosuresolutions/reports/documents/7ForeclosureImpacts.pdf

But what happens to a house that is left unattended, among many other things:

1. Neglected maintenance is obvious:
 - a. grass is un-kept;
 - b. paint is faded;
 - c. windows are often broken and boarded up
 - d. Everything looks tired and unappealing

2. Life threatening conditions might develop, such as mold.

Deferred Maintenance

But the reality is that we need to look into the images of the media to find a desolate house or a desolate place. Often we are walking around with desolate places in our hearts, minds, and spirits. The difference is that we think they are not visible to others.

Our deferred maintenance is all-too real and is bad for relationships, and that includes our relationship with God.

What would it mean for us to live “uncultivated” lives? What would it mean for us to continue to defer the maintenance of our spirit? What would it mean for our house “to be left to us,” and to be left to us, desolate? I suspect that just like a structure, we will start to deteriorate.

Because maybe there have been moments when we felt God calling, but we have “told God, like we tell a child who is annoying us, to shut up and go to her/his room.”²

But, how wonderful it is to that the *érēmos* /desolate place, is ironically also a place where God richly grants God’s presence and provision for those who seek God.

Because even if we are feeling the effect of some desolate place within us, even if we say this morning, “I have not felt God calling,” as Eugene Peterson states, “God’s silence is not a silence of absence, but a silence of presence. It is not a

² Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*, Loc.680.

sterile silence, but a pregnant silence.”³ Pregnant with God’s will and promises for us.

You know, I truly believe that we, this house, we are entering a place of renewal and transformation.

Sure, some may be feeling a sense of apprehension. We might be nervous about some risk taking, but I think it is time that we tend to some deferred maintenance.

Those of you who are here, and those who came before us have done an extraordinary job, maintaining the structures of our house. One cannot enter any of our buildings without admiring their beauty and uniqueness, and feeling blessed. But, this time around, God is calling our attention to the deeper part of those who are in the house. This is the time of **transformation**. And how blessed we would be if we give God our attention.

As I mentioned to you before, Lent is indeed a time of consider difficult truths and to open our hearts to look for the path of faithfulness.

So, I invite us to adopt a Lenten discipline of introspection, and tend to our relationship with God.

Perhaps is time for some home improvement:

Maybe we can start by cutting those things that continue to hurt us with the lawnmower of forgiveness;

Perhaps we can use a coat of the paint of hope;

Perhaps is time to replace the plumbing with love and joy;

Maybe the electrical wire can be replaced, so that the light of discernment will shine throughout our home;

May the heating system be replaced, so that we can be warm with the power of the Spirit of God. May our windows remain open so that we may hear God calling and we may answer. Amen.

³Loc 686.