**Your house is forsaken and desolate**

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Scripture: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; **Luke 13:31-35**

I’m afraid there might be two sermons here. One’s pretty theological. The other is a call to a deep discipleship. If there’s a direct application of how this should affect your lives, you’re going to need to listen hard.

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 outside of Jerusalem.'

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 a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. 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.'"

There is a lot to meditate on in this short gospel passage. Last week, we looked at Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. This week, a passage near the end of his life. He seems no less driven than he did in the wilderness. He knows where he has to end up: in Jerusalem. He knows what is going to happen: He is going to die.

Would we be as calm as Jesus is, contemplating a violent death?

And even in this contemplation, what concerns him? The “children of Jerusalem,” whom he seeks to protect as a hen protects her chicks.

But they didn’t want his protection. They shook it off. They were unwilling to receive his protection.

Is there anyone in your life to whom you have offered comfort and help, and they have refused it? Has anyone ever offered you comfort, and you spurned it? It makes you wonder: why do we reject, in Mary Pipher’s words, “the shelter of each other?”

But then there is this strange little line, and it especially drew my attention: “See, your house is left to you.” Perhaps I just am drawn to obscurity. Still, Jesus says, “See!” Jesus himself seems to be drawing our attention. So I want to dwell in this house for a while.

Perhaps your translation has something else. But looking at the Greek, this translation seems reasonable, if a bit obscure.

But it raises several questions:

1. What does it mean to “be left”?
2. What is the house?
3. Who is doing the leaving?

What does it mean to be left?

I am grateful that we have a parallel passage in Matthew’s gospel, which is almost word for word the same as Luke’s. One important difference is in what Matthew records for this sentence. Luke has “See, your house is left to you.” Matthew adds one word: “See, your house is left to you, desolate.”

So, I think we can safely understand the last question: What does it mean to “be left”? It means to be left empty and desolate, like an empty city or an abandoned lover, a wasteland; even, with echoes of last week’s teaching, a desert.

What is the house?

I think I can say that it’s not too much of a stretch to say that it’s the house of God, the Temple, the center of religious life, and (to be frank) of the religious economy. Don’t you think?

And it’s an unsettling thought: the temple of God without anyone in it. And, in a very practical and real way, this really does come to pass. Travel to Jerusalem, and see if you can find Herod’s temple. Is it still there? You’ll find the Western Wall and other remnants, fragments of an arch, an occasional archeological find. The temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

The house of God, made empty and desolate. Desolate: meaning there is no solace to be found.

Finally, who is doing the leaving? Who is doing the abandoning?

If we are right that it’s the house of God that Jesus is referring to, then the unsettling conclusion is this: that God is doing the abandoning.

Jerusalem is about to become, literally, a God-forsaken place.

Listen to these words from John’s Gospel (John.2.13-22)

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he spoke of the temple of his body.

And these words from Mark’s Gospel, as Jesus is dying on the cross (Mark.15.34):

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The temple is abandoned. The temple of Jesus’s body is abandoned. God abandons Jesus. Jesus abandons himself to death. Today, he is casting out demons and healing the sick. But in three days, he finishes his work, and his work is to abandon himself to his own destruction.

That was then, and Jesus was speaking to the religious establishment of his day, speaking a word of warning and judgment. Speaking in the context of his own impending death and resurrection.

This is now. Sometimes I look at the state of the church in the United States, and I feel that God has abandoned us, made us into a desert. There is so much empty spirituality, so many uninhabited meetinghouses, so many “bare, ruined choirs.”

In the words of the old song:

Well may Thy servants mourn, my God,

The Church’s desolation;

The state of Zion calls aloud

For grief and lamentation.

Once she was all alive to Thee

And thousands were converted,

But now a sad reverse we see,

Her glory is departed.

We are in the season of Lent, but we remain Easter people. We feel the sadness and sorrow of our situation, but we remember that after God’s self-abandonment comes God’s resurrection. We remember that after Jesus laid down his life, he took it up again.

Just as in the Jesus story, just when things looked the darkest, we can place our hope in the resurrection life. Like Abraham, sadly believing he would have no children, God comes to us with a promise that God will bring us life.

But when will this life come to us?

Honestly, I am not sure what to say, what wisdom to give. Except to reflect a bit on what Jesus tells his listeners. Can we hear an echo of our situation in what Jesus says to them?

First, he says, “See, your house is left to you.” And then he says, “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.'"

“The one who comes in the name of the Lord”: this is an allusion to Psalm 118 and to the honor that Jesus will receive on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday, when Jesus is recognized, briefly, as who he really is. When he is recognized as the one who enters through the gates of righteousness. When he is recognized as the chief cornerstone, although he looked like the stone which the builders rejected. When proper honor was given to him.

And apparently, Jesus is still waiting to hear his people say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” When we recognize him for who he really is. Not the Jesus of our imagination. Not the Jesus of our fears. Not the American Jesus in either the conservative or progressive models.

I think we need to strive, perhaps give all that we have, to discerning the real Jesus in all the noise. We seek, not an American church, not a sectarian church, but perhaps a remnant trying to remain faithful as well as they can to the one who comes scorned and rejected.