

Haunted House

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Luke 13:31-35

It was time, and so Jesus turned toward Jerusalem, where he would suffer and die, where he would be raised. On the way, he announced the coming kingdom: by throwing out demons, by healing the sick, and by teaching surprising lessons.

At that time, some Pharisees came and said to him, “Leave! Go away from here! Herod wants to kill you.” He told them, “Go tell that fox, ‘Look, I’m throwing out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and I will finish on the third day.’ Yet I do have to be going, today and tomorrow and the day after, because a prophet can’t die away from Jerusalem.”

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem! The one who kills the prophets, the one who stones to death the messengers sent to her! How many times I’ve wanted to gather your children together, the way a chicken gathers her chicks under her wings, but you didn’t want that. Look, your house is left for you. I tell you, you won’t see me until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the Lord’s name.’”

Children’s Story

What a busy afternoon for Sammy the Squirrel! Exploring the Great Forest. Making discoveries at every turn. It was fun, so much much fun that Sammy lost track of time. All of sudden it was dark, and he was far from home.

A full moon rose to cast long shadows. Bats flew off to dance. Owls stood up to hoot. And . . . what was that?! Sammy heard it loud and clear. But he didn’t know what it was. It couldn’t be a good thing, not a sound like that. Sammy’s heart started to pound. His breath grew shallow. But slowly, carefully, he moved toward home. Then he heard it again, loud and clear and dangerous. So he ran.

He ran and he ran. He ran without looking back. He ran without stopping. He ran straight for home. But he made a mistake. Instead of running for the new Squirrel Family home, he ran for their old home, for the tree they used to live in longer than anyone could remember. But that tree was shivered, fallen to the ground, and twisted. No one was home in that empty, old tree. It was no protection at all. Now what?!

Well, as it turned out, no one and nothing was after Sammy. The danger was all in his imagination. That’s a good thing, too, with Sammy running to the wrong tree, the tree with no one in it to protect him. What if the danger had been real?

Sermon

Local teenagers called it the “haunted house.” And why not? No one had lived in it for years. And it showed. Persistent patches of paint clung here and there to the clapboards, but the sashes had all surrendered their glass long ago. The front door hung loosely and open from its rusted hinges, shrinking back from the porch roof that sagged over it. Old newspapers and empty bottles — wine and beer mostly — littered the bare wood floors. And a gray blanket lay lazily in a corner.

Anyone could tell: no one had lived in that house for years. But it had a past. It had a story. Four generations of children had been born and raised in that house, then sent off into the world. It had been a happy place, that house, a place of laughter and love.

That was before the war. The war took life and laughter away. It left the rooms empty, one by one, until no one was left. Then the house itself was left for dead. Nothing remained except a fading memory, a haunting memory, of what had been.

“Your house is left for you,” Jesus said, and those were not happy words. Jesus was speaking, of course, to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the hub and the summit of Israel, the home and the destination of the people of God. Jerusalem, surmounted by Zion and the Temple of the Almighty, the dwelling place of God.

“The temple is yours,” Jesus said. “You’re welcome to it. But it’s a house without inhabitant. A house, but not a home. It’s not God’s house any more, not now, not ever again. It’s your house. Do with it as you see fit. Defend it as you are able.”

But they wouldn’t be able to defend their house. In forty years, it would be destroyed. Only one wall would remain — the wall before which Jews wail and pray to this day. Only one wall would remain, and with it a haunted memory.

But it didn’t have to end up this way. No. A terrible storm was coming. Rome had little patience with rebellion and diminishing tolerance for those who would not honor Caesar as a god. Again and again, Jews had provoked the Romans. Rome was the great enemy, after all. Rome had trampled on sacred ground. Rome had soured the milk and stolen the honey. To anyone with eyes, it was obvious enough what was coming. Rebels would continue to emerge and poke at the Romans, and Rome would reach a breaking point. In other words, Jerusalem’s days were numbered.

But Jesus loved Jerusalem and was prepared to shelter her. “Huddle under my wings,” he pleaded, “and I will shelter you! Like a chicken who gathers her chicks under her wings, saving them from a barnyard fire while she herself dies, so I would die to save you, to save you from the real enemy — not Rome, but the power behind Rome, the power behind every evil and injustice, including your own.”

But “No,” said Jerusalem. “No,” keeping to her stubborn habit, being true to her history: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem! The one who kills the prophets, the one who stones to death the messengers sent to her!” Jerusalem would not be saved by Jesus. She refused.

Nevertheless, Jesus would die. Some Pharisees had warned him about Herod. Who those Pharisees were, Luke doesn’t say. Perhaps like Gamaliel (Acts 5), they weren’t sure about Jesus. Perhaps they wondered if God were working through Jesus. Or perhaps like Nicodemus (John 3), they had decided that God was working through Jesus. In any case, those Pharisees warned Jesus: “Herod wants to kill you.” They urged Jesus to get out of Galilee, Herod’s territory, to go perhaps to Syria or the Decapolis.

But Jesus wasn’t worried about Herod. Herod was a “fox.” A predator, sure. But he was no lion. “Tell that fox,” Jesus said — “Tell that fox that I won’t be turned aside from my work in Galilee. I will work until I have finished here!” Yes, Jesus would be moving on. Soon enough he would leave Galilee. But not because of Herod. No, he had an appointment to keep in Jerusalem. And to Jerusalem he would go.

His Jerusalem appointment was an appointment with death.

Cities are places of life and vitality. Some people can’t imagine being anywhere else. In the city, they come alive. To live in Paris, Rome, London! To live in New York, Chicago, L.A. even! But for Jesus, Jerusalem — the city, the center of all things Jewish — for Jesus, Jerusalem was a place first of all to die. To die and only then to come truly alive.

And so to Jerusalem Jesus would go. To die. To stretch out his wings. To give shelter to everyone who would huddle beneath those wings. And if Jerusalem said, “No,” despite repeated invitations, then word would go out to every village, every farm, every ship at sea, to every nation and every people, to every human heart. “Come to me, and be saved! Come to me, and live!”

That word still sounds today. Besides everyone else, it calls to us. “Come to me,” Jesus says. “Come to me.”

Whom or what do you trust? Where have you placed your hope? What’s the heart of your life? What’s the center of your religion? What do you cling to, thinking it will last forever?

Sometimes we cling to things, the wrong things, things that are as hollow and lifeless as a haunted house. But there’s life, real life, only in one place. Under the wings of Jesus, stretched out on the cross. A cross planted into a Jerusalem hill.

Where else? It’s where prophets go to die.