

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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Rio Rancho, NM

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FRYING PAN TO FIRE

Luke 13: 31-35

Jesus must have felt caught between the frying pan and the fire. In Galilee the Pharisees inform him that King Herod Antipas wanted to kill him. This was the same Herod Antipas who had already beheaded his cousin John the Baptist. So the rabbi from Nazareth found himself a wanted man in the frying pan that was Galilee.

But then Jesus looked ahead to what awaited him in Jerusalem-the prophet's fate at the hands of evil forces. There before him the fire that would consume him. So between the frying pan and the fire, Jesus faced deadly opposition wherever he turned. There was no "City of Refuge" for Jesus. Indeed, he "came into his own and his own received him not." He had no place to hide.

The leaders who put the squeeze on Jesus were a sorry lot, indeed. Like so many in authority, they abused their power and harmed anyone who stood in their way. Herod Antipas the king,

Caiaphas the High Priest, and Pontius Pilate the Roman governor all conspired together in Jerusalem to do away with Jesus.

But their privileged position was not to last. Within a decade of Jesus' execution, all three leaders would be run out of office. In the year 36 A.D. Caiaphas and Pilate were relieved of their duties. Three years later in the year 39 A.D. Herod Antipas was removed and banished to what we now call France. They did indeed "strut and fret their hour upon the stage" only to exit into obscurity.

So Jesus considered his tenuous position in his home district of Galilee. And he calls out Herod Antipas, "Go and tell that fox that I will work miracles until I finish my time here." In other words, Jesus would not flee from Herod's jurisdiction until his work was done proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God and healing those in need. He would leave the frying pan of Galilee when the seed had been planted and not before.

But then Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and lamented the opposition he would encounter in the City of David. He saw the fire ahead, the suffering and rejection in a city that stones the prophets. He uttered this painful word of lamentation, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not

willing.” Jesus knows that no prophet is acceptable in his own country-neither in his home district nor in the capital city. And he laments.

Lamentation is a cry of sorrow over the sins and suffering in the world. We lament those too blind to see and too cold to care. We lament leaders who feel threatened by anyone and everyone and then lash out in anger. We lament a “town without pity” that rejects those who speak the truth.

Jesus is brokenhearted for the city that he loves with a mother’s love. How he would have gathered this brood under the wings of God’s love. But these frightened children hid themselves from God like Adam and Eve in the Garden. And worse, they turned upon the very One who loved them the dearest. Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their lives for those who despise them. What a poignant and sorrowful thought!

The scholar Walter Brueggemann has taught us the importance of voicing to God our lamentation. Like crying out to God when suffering under Egyptian bondage. Or Jesus’ sorrow over the bullies determined to end his life. Lamentation gives public voice to our personal pain and unites us in solidarity with all who bear the mark of suffering.

Today in our country and indeed the world many feel squeezed in the current political climate. Federal workers losing their jobs, many of whom are veterans. Our allies worrying about a trade war as well as the hot wars around our world. People of color stressing about their standing in our society. Retirees watching their 401k's shrink. Immigrants facing detention and deportation. Gay, lesbian and transgendered citizens feeling threatened. Dissidents in peril for lifting their voices in protest. Those out of step with the prevailing political winds now feel under siege. It is a cause for lamentation for all the uncertainty, anxiety and fear. We lament what seems like a sophisticated form of bullying.

All this reminds me of my own adolescence, a time of stress for many young people. The frying pan and the fire of my middle school was the merciless kidding, endless ridicule, and relentless bullying. All pretty much unchecked by the school authorities.

Now I had two classmates who were polar opposites. Fred was simply a bully from day one in the first grade. Bobby, on the other hand, was the quintessential nerd, as we now say. Fred never let up on Bobby, year after year making fun of this brilliant but strange young man. Bobby would become our high school valedictorian and later a star in Silicon Valley, as you would expect.

But Fred kept goading and humiliating Bobby up until the eighth grade. Now long ago and far away at Hogg Junior High School in Tyler, Texas, there was a curious custom. Any two students could ask the coaches to let them duke it out with oversized boxing gloves. The idea, I suppose, was to stop schoolyard fights and bring the conflict under the control of the coaches.

So Bobby, a large but very awkward eighth grader, publicly challenged Fred to a boxing match in the gym. Fred of course thought it was a joke. But it was not a joke and sure enough at noon virtually the entire school gathered in the gym for the battle of the bully and the nerd. Fred sneered at his lumbering opponent, but Bobby was determined. This would be one of the most stunning days of my adolescence.

Why? Because Bobby with those oversized boxing gloves knocked Fred out before our unbelieving eyes. All the years of pent-up rage came out in Bobby's wild swings. And one of those ungainly punches landed solidly on Fred's exposed jaw. And the bully dropped like a rock on the gym floor. I don't think Fred ever messed with Bobby again.

Now I am not necessarily advocating this as a means of dealing with bullying and school yard fights. All I know is that when young

hearts are humiliated and bullied, we all suffer. Some who've been bullied return to their schools with weapons and carry out their revenge. And then we all weep for the young lives lost and ruined forever.

There is a poignant song about bullying entitled "Don't Laugh at Me". I hope you will go online and see the music video produced by its author Mark Wills. This is a lamentation for all those who have been bullied-for my classmate Bobby and all those being bullied even to this day. Here are the lyrics of this haunting lament:

I'm a little boy with glasses, the one they call the geek

A little girl who never smiles, cause I've got braces on my teeth

And I know how it feels to cry myself to sleep.

I'm that kid on every playground who's always chosen last

A single teenage mother tryin' to overcome my past

You don't have to be my friend, is it too much to ask?

Don't laugh at me, don't call me names

Don't get your pleasure from my pain

In God's eyes we're all the same

Someday we'll all have perfect wings

Don't laugh at me.

I'm the cripple on the corner you pass me on the street

I wouldn't be out here begging if I had enough to eat

And don't think that I don't notice that our eyes never meet.

I'm fat, I'm thin, I'm short, I'm tall

I'm deaf, I'm blind, hey aren't we all?

Don't laugh at me, don't call me names,

Don't get your pleasure from my pain

In God's eyes we're all the same

Someday we'll all have perfect wings

Don't laugh at me.

The church of Jesus Christ is where we raise our lamentations for all those who are bullied. And by God's grace we wrap our loving arms around them, for the sake of Christ our Lord, who faced the frying pan and the fire, the bullies who did him in. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy upon us. Amen.