

2 Lent, Year C

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17—4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Before I get into the sermon,
let me say a word about
something we'll do next Sunday.

A week or so ago
one of our vestry members
Brandon Medley asked,
“When do we pray the Great Litany?”

If you don't know what the Great Litany is,
it's a long series of penitential prayers
found on page 148 of the prayer book.

It has been there since the first
Book of Common Prayer in 1549,
but its roots go all the way back to the early Church.

Christians would gather together
and process around their towns
praying and chanting these prayers,
but it also became something
congregations could do together in their pews.

My answer to Brandon's question was,
“Well, we *should* be doing it during Lent.
At a minimum, we *should* have done it
at least on the *first* Sunday of Lent,
but you know, we're just now getting back
and still finding our rhythm,
and honestly . . . I forgot.”

“Yeah, but Lonnie,” Brandon said,
“these are prayers we need to be praying.”

He's not wrong.

Listen to these few petitions from the Great Litany:

From all oppression, conspiracy, and rebellion;
from violence, battle, and murder;

and from dying suddenly and unprepared.
Good Lord, deliver us.

That it may please thee
to make wars to cease in all the world;
to give to all nations unity, peace, and concord;
and to bestow freedom upon all peoples.
We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

That it may please thee
to support, help, and comfort
all who are in danger, necessity, and tribulation.
We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

And perhaps the one that packs the biggest wallop:

That it may please thee
to strengthen such as do stand;
to comfort and help the weak-hearted;
to raise up those who fall;
and finally to beat down Satan under our feet.
We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

Like I said, Brandon is not wrong.
The world needs us to be praying these prayers.
We need us to be praying these prayers.

So be prepared.
We will pray the Great Litany next week
as our opening procession.

And for what it's worth,
it wouldn't hurt, O fellow Christians,
for you to crack open your prayer book to page 148
even when you're not at church
and pray the Great Litany out loud
once or twice a week . . .
not for the sake of what it will do for you—
this isn't about you—
but because the world needs your prayers,
and these are prayers we need to be praying.

* * *

Part of the reason the world needs our prayers
is because of politics.

Now, when I say politics,
I don't just mean it in the American sense
of who you vote for or what policies you prefer.
What I'm talking about is bigger
than whether you are a Donkey or an Elephant.

What I mean is the big picture of human nature:
the manipulations and machinations we all do
on scales large and small
as we vie for power
and try to remake the world in our own image.

We are seeing it right now on a global scale
with a petty president of a foreign power
seeking to reestablish a bygone empire
to bolster his fragile ego
at the cost of so much peace and prosperity.

But we also see it in our daily lives:
from the petty office tyrant
who makes life miserable
by telling half-truths
assigning blame,
and cooking fish in the microwave,
to the domineering family member
who through the subtle art of
good ol' southern passive-aggression,
always, always, always gets their way.

Political manipulation is everywhere.

Naturally, most of us do not like it
when politics comes up in our religion
because we like to think Jesus is somehow
innocent or ignorant of politics¹ . . .
or at least above it all.

(Spoiler alert: he *is* above it all,
not in the sense that he is unaware
but in the sense that he is the King of Kings,
and no matter who you vote for,
the King always gets the final word.)

¹ Clapp, Rodney. "Pastoral Perspective, Luke 13:31-35." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Year C. Vol. 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 2009.

Those who think Jesus was
somehow separate from human politics
have not read the Gospels.²

Jesus intentionally gathered a band of disciples
who represented every stripe
of the political spectrum.

He spoke uncomfortable truths about and to
the politicians and power-players of his day,
and he said things that got him
in very hot political water.

Why else do you think he was crucified
on a Roman cross
by Roman soldiers
paid by the Roman government?

You may never have realized this,
but there are only two people other than Jesus
whose names you are guaranteed to say
every Sunday in church.

One is the name of his mama, the Virgin Mary.
And the other?
The other is the name of a politician.

You say the name Pontius Pilate
as part of the Nicene Creed every Sunday
precisely because Jesus came up against
the politics of his day.

So yeah . . .
Jesus was
and is
and ever shall be
keenly aware
of the political
machinations and
manipulations of our day.

* * *

That's a big part of what makes
today's gospel reading so interesting.

² Ibid.

The Pharisees—
religious leaders with their own political agenda—
come to Jesus and say,
“Hey man, you better get out of here.
King Herod is looking for you
and wants to kill you.”

On the surface it sounds like they’re trying to help,
but they likely don’t care about Jesus one bit.
They just want to scare him off their turf.

Jesus knows exactly what they’re doing, though,
so he says:

“Well since y’all seem to be
such good friends with Herod,
why don’t you go tell that old fox
that I said he can stuff it.
I intend to keep on
curing the lame,
healing the sick,
and casting out demons
until I know it’s time
for me to go to Jerusalem.
And that’s when we’ll have
the political showdown
to end all showdowns.”

Now, that by itself is political statement enough from Jesus.
You do not call the puppet-king of Judea an old fox
and get away with it.

But Jesus goes further.
He looks toward Jerusalem and speaks.

You may think of Jerusalem
as this holy city, a city of peace,
but no . . .

Jerusalem was and still is a capital,
which means Jerusalem was and still is
a place of politicians
and power-plays
and political manipulations.

“O Jerusalem Jerusalem,” he says,
“the city that kills the prophets
and stones those who are sent to it!”

Jesus *knows* it is the place
where he will die at the hands
of the priests
and politicians
and petty tyrants,
including all the fickle everyday people—
people just like you and me—
who will crowd the streets
and scream “Crucify him! Crucify him!”
all for the political sport of it.

What he *could* have said was,
“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
the city that kills the prophets
and stones those who are sent to it!
You are nothing but evil,
and you never do what I say!
Now comes the hour of your annihilation!
Now I will destroy you,
for I *am* above your politics!
By God, I am the *King*,
and today I decree your final destruction!”

But that’s the kind of thing petty tyrants
with fragile egos say
when they look toward capitals.
Throughout history the capitals have changed—
“O Warsaw, Warsaw!”
“O Paris, Paris!”
“O Kyiv, Kyiv!”—
but the threat is always the same.

Instead, Jesus says,
“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
the city that kills the prophets
and stones those who are sent to it!
*How I have desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*”

Where the politics of the world says,
“Do what I want, or I will destroy you,”
the politics of Jesus says,
“You’ve never done what I want,
so I will find a way
to love you even more.”

We push away.
God pulls us closer.

We'll see the culmination of this in just a few weeks
when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem on Good Friday,
and he, too, will manipulate the system.
Oh yes, he will turn it on its head entirely.

On Good Friday,
Jesus will don a crown of thorns,
and because he knows how lost we are—
how our politics and power-plays
almost always lead to death and destruction—
he will take death and destruction upon himself . . .
and undo it forever.

The undoing of evil began on Good Friday
not through an act of conquest but an act of love,
and the King will come again
to bring it to its completion.

* * *

So, with the world as it is,
what can you do in the meantime?

Well, number one,
you can say your prayers.
As I said at the beginning,
the world needs your prayers right now,
and you are Christians,
and you know how to pray.

Number two,
you can follow Jesus the Prince of Peace in all things—
no matter where you work,
no matter what your family is like,
no matter who you vote for,
no matter what policies you prefer—
you can allow him to reign in your life,
which necessarily means letting go
of a lot of things you've been told
are important,
and doing things for the sake of others
that you never thought you'd do before.

And number three,
you can stand in the sure and certain Hope

that Jesus truly is the King of Kings,
and in the end,
the King will always get
the final word.

Amen.