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What Might Have Been

a sermon on Luke 19.41-44

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Years ago, when I was still as much a boy as a man, tragedy struck two people I cared about. They were a married couple, past middle age but not yet retired. They were faithful members of our church, devout Christians, solid citizens, good people – the kind anybody would want for neighbors. Their son died. I did not know him, but I think he was around 30, give or take a few years. He had rejected the faith and the values in which he had been brought up. He determined his own path in life, and some of his choices were not good ones. At the time we were not told the cause of his death. I suspect now he died of AIDS. Probably they were embarrassed, and those who knew were too polite to say so. I only knew then, and only know for sure now, that he and his parents had quarreled over the way he lived his life, and that his death had come as a terrible and unwanted fulfillment of their warnings. They were in no mood to say, “I told you so.” They only wanted their son back and wished they had been wrong.

I do not remember much about the funeral service. I remember the room vividly, though, the pews in the chapel of the funeral home, the closed casket. I remember most his mother crying. Her husband held her and she kept asking, “Why? ... Why did things turn out this way? They didn’t have to. If only ... If only ...”

When I read this passage about Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, I think of that mother. Her grief, her confusion, her painful belief that things might have been different. If only her son had listened. If only she could have broken through his defenses and reached him ... what might have been?

Jesus is full of surprises. If you read the gospels and Jesus does not constantly surprise you, then you are not paying attention. You have heard the story enough, and you are familiar with it enough, that you don’t really listen anymore. You just catch a word or two to find out where in the gospel you are, and then your ears shut down and you assume you know what’s going on. Don’t let that happen. Pay attention. Jesus is full of surprises. For example, when Jesus travels down off the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, amid the praises of his disciples, what would you expect him to do next?

Anyone who knows the Bible can tell at a glance that Jesus is acting out a royal coronation. When David’s son Solomon was crowned king, he was paraded through

the streets on his father's donkey while the people celebrated. Jesus was drawing on those old traditions to make a statement. He was entering Jerusalem as its rightful king. What would a king do upon entering his city?

Throwing the money changers out of the temple makes sense. We might expect a new king to put his house in order, to cleanse the temple. What we do not expect is the scene we find in our scripture reading: Jesus weeping over the city. The people around Jesus are so joyful! They are convinced the kingdom of God is about to begin. Jesus knows he is riding to his death. And yet, he does not weep for himself. He weeps for the people who will reject him, who have already rejected him. What if ... what might have been ... if only they realized ... but now it was too late.

What is going on here? I want to help you understand it so that you can better understand the heart of God. This scene gives us a peek into God's heart, and it is the heart of a father that breaks when his children go astray. Some of us know how it feels to be that father. All of us ought to know how it feels to be that son or daughter, for surely God has shed tears for you and me.

What's going on here? Jesus threw a party and the most important people did not show up. Luke provides a detail about this event that the other gospels do not mention, although it is obvious enough if we think things through. Luke tells us that the people cheering and waving palm branches were disciples. Do not assume he means the twelve disciples. Jesus had twelve special disciples, but many more people followed him. We know there were other men and women who came with him to Jerusalem. When Luke says disciples here, he means Jesus' followers and all the people who expected great things from him. This group around Jesus was not large. Most people were not in this crowd. The temple leaders were not in this crowd. The Pharisees were not in this crowd. We find them in our text ordering Jesus to stop the praises. The scribes were not in this crowd. Most of Jerusalem was not in this crowd. And their absence is conspicuous.

Think of a wedding where the bride's family does not show up. They live nearby, but they disapprove of the groom, so they boycott the wedding. I've done a lot of weddings, and nearly always even badly-divided families manage to make nice for one day. If the groom walks in and then the bride marches in, and her family is not there – that's a strong message. Jesus got a message like that. He staged a grand entrance. His disciples led the cheering. But nobody joined them. Even as his supporters sang his praises, he knew would be rejected. He could tell by who was absent. He could tell by the reaction of the Pharisees. The king had returned, but his own would not receive him. God had at last visited his people to bring salvation, but they could not see it.

Jesus believed his friends were right to celebrate and sing praises. He told the Pharisees that if the disciples were silent, the stones would shout. That means God was doing

something big and wonderful. And yet while his friends were dancing with joy, Jesus started weeping. He wanted so much to bring Jerusalem salvation, but they would not have it.

Jesus reminds me here of Jeremiah and other prophets of old who announced judgment on God's people and then wept at their fate. Jesus complains that they do not know the things that make for peace and they do not recognize the time of their visitation. This means they do not recognize who Jesus is. They do not accept his ideas about what it means to be the people of God. These two points were where Jesus differed from all those who did not join his celebration. They did not believe he came from God, and they had their own, different ideas about how to be God's people. They thought being God's people meant God loved them and hated everyone else. They thought it meant they were better than everyone else. Jesus said God loves the world, and his people ought to love their enemies. For Jesus, being chosen by God means you are chosen for service and sacrifice, not privilege and power. He saw clearly enough where their ideas would lead them. And he was right. Things got hotter and hotter in Jerusalem, until just over 30 years later the Judeans rebelled against Rome. Jesus' dire prophecy came true. He describes the destruction of the temple in this passage: not one stone left standing on top of another.

Things could have been different. And Jesus mourned what might have been. If only they had opened their minds and hearts just a little bit. If only they had *listened* to what he said. If only they recognized God when he came to them.

He weeps with the heart of the father whose son went astray, just as my friend mourned the loss of her son. Lament: the language of pain, a heart broken not only by what was, but also by what might have been.

Some of you know that pain. You have children or grandchildren who have gone astray. Or maybe it is a brother or sister, even a parent. I have a friend whose father is an alcoholic. It is as if the roles are reversed, and he laments what might have been for his father.

I've seen it too many times in my work as a pastor. A kid from a good home tries drugs, gets hooked, and ruins his or her life. Drinking and driving, breaking the law, contracting a disease, or simply turning his or her back on God or family. Kids can go wrong in so many ways these days. But this is nothing new. I love the movie *A River Runs through It*. It's based on a true story. It's about two brothers, sons of a Presbyterian pastor, and one of them (played by Brad Pitt) chooses the fast life: drinking, gambling, running with dangerous people. He ends up dead at an early age. Toward the end the pastor/father preaches a sermon about loving people and wanting to help them, but nothing you do works but you go on loving. We only hear a brief few lines of it, but it breaks your heart. And yet it heals too, if this pain is yours.

If you know this pain, our scripture reading is good news for you. Why? Because it shows you God's heart, and God's heart is full of love and compassion.

What would you have done if you had been in Jesus' place? You came to claim your rightful place, among the people who should have welcomed you, but they reject you. What would you do? I marvel at how sensitive people can be if they feel they have not gotten their due. Children fight over whose cupcake has more icing. Employees get jealous and angry if a colleague gets a bigger bonus. We human beings tend to get completely wrapped up in our rights and what's mine and what's fair. Imagine your reaction if after 25 years of loyal service, your company told you, "We don't want you anymore." That cuts to the bone. Now try to see all this again from Jesus' perspective. He came to his rightful place, and he wasn't wanted.

He told a couple of parables about how he felt. In one, a farmer planted a fig tree in his garden. He nurtured the tree and cared for it, but it never bore fruit. In the other, a landowner rented his land to sharecroppers. At harvest time he sent servants to collect his share of the produce, but they beat the servant. Every servant he sent was refused and mistreated. Finally he sent his own son, thinking they would respect him, but they killed him.

If Jesus were like most people, he would have been glad judgment was coming. He would have been hurt and angry. When he wept, it would have been for himself. But Jesus is not like most people. Jesus wept for Jerusalem, just as he prayed, "Father, forgive them," as he hung on the cross. That's God's heart. That's the love, mercy, and compassion of God.

If you know the pain of a wayward loved one, you can take comfort in knowing that God shares your grief. Just as you long for your loved one to turn around and come home, so does God. He shares that deep desire and pain. And best of all, God can do something about it. God can call that person and work in his or her heart. God does not force anyone. We remain free. That's why Jerusalem rejected Jesus. Many reject him today.

And because we are free, we are capable of ruining our lives, even eternally. Jerusalem pursued its own agenda all the way to destruction. Judas Iscariot chose a path that ended in disaster. People do so today. Our freedom is real. The consequences are also real. Some people go on rejecting God forever. Even Christians can get into a terrible mess by rejecting God's way. Yet we know this is not what God wants. He wants every prodigal to return home — where all receive a hero's welcome they do not deserve.

If you know that pain, keep loving. Keep praying. Keep hoping. You have glimpsed God's heart, but you cannot comprehend the awesome power of his love and mercy.

Finally, while some of us know a pain like that Jesus felt for Jerusalem, all of us ought to know how it feels to be the wayward soul. I believe that at some time or another, Jesus has wept for you the way he wept for Jerusalem.

You may think, “Surely not for me. I am a believer. I’m not perfect, but I love God. I try to do his will. Why would Jesus weep for me?” And you have a point. Jesus’ complaint with Jerusalem was that its people, especially its leaders, did not see who he was and they did not listen to him. Hopefully you are not like that. You believe Jesus is the Son of God. You may fall short when it comes to living the way he wants – after all, forgiving your enemies is hard; loving your neighbor is hard; trusting God for your needs and not obsessing about money is hard – you may not get it right, but at least you want to.

Nevertheless, I still believe that at one time or another, Jesus has wept for you. I think Jesus has wept for everyone, because we have all turned our backs on God. The very fact that he had to die on the cross for us shows us the extent of our need. That’s the thing about breaking your relationship with God. When you wander away from him, you don’t realize at the time how great your need is. You might even feel pretty good about yourself. It is only when you are back home that you realize how far away you were. It is only when you are in your right mind that you realize how delusional you were.

I think I can explain this best by pointing to two of Jesus’ closest friends: Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot. Both of them hurt Jesus very deeply. Peter ran away and denied knowing Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus for money. They had both been close to Jesus. Jesus loved them both. Both had promised to be loyal. Both failed miserably. Here is the difference: Peter repented. He accepted Jesus’ grace and forgiveness. I have long wondered if Judas Iscariot might have become one of the greatest apostles, even after he betrayed Jesus, if he had stayed around until Easter and met the risen Jesus and been forgiven. I am sure Jesus would have forgiven him. Judas was the one who wouldn’t have it. Peter was thrilled to get a second chance. He went on to great things, becoming the bold and powerful leader Jesus knew he could be. What might Judas have been? ... If only ...

That’s basically the choice each one of us has. We can return home to God, accept his grace, and answer his call. Or we can become a might-have-been ... an if-only ...

Don’t worry about your limitations. God knows them. He made you. He does not expect you to be the Savior. Jesus has already done that. God just wants you to love him and offer him your life and your gifts, such as they are.

Don't worry about your sin. Jesus died for you. Your sin can be forgiven. Never let it hold you back.

Don't worry about your weaknesses. Christ will live in you. You will grow. He will see you through to completion.

Don't worry about your faith being too small. It's not the size of your faith that matters. It's what you put your faith in. Put it in him. He will not let you down.

Do not let these or any other concerns hold you back. Surrender your life to him. Welcome him into your heart exactly the way Jerusalem did not. Welcome him the way his disciples did: with shouts of praise, singing, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

You do not have to be a might-have-been. The verdict on your life does not have to be: If only ... if only ...

Amen.

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