

Lenten Stories: Places and Promises

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Luke 13:31-35

There were significant COVID casualties and modest ones. One very modest casualty for me was the loss of a simple ritual. For many, many years, on most Monday mornings prior to two years ago this week, I would find a diner and have breakfast. I would ruminate on the Sunday just experienced and turn my thinking and planning to the coming week and the upcoming Sunday. I would bring a stack of papers and magazines and a book or two and set up camp in a booth, pounding Diet Coke and enjoying my eggs in leisured contemplation.

But not for the last two years – until this past Monday, where I found myself once again enjoying said beverage and a Western omelette, hold the ham, multi-grain toast. Sitting in my booth, I looked out the window and saw a sign, not for the first time, but in a new way. The sign welcomed me to the city of Philadelphia; I, in fact, was enjoying my first “kind of” post-COVID breakfast within a few feet of the city limits.

You all know this, of course, that where we are situated enables that reality often, and often without even being aware of it. But given that I was in a contemplative mode, I contemplated a bit more than usual.

- On one side of that sign, let’s call it the restaurant side, I actually could have eaten there much earlier, absent a mask, than just a few feet south, where the COVID protocols differed.
- If I bought groceries on that side of things, the helpful Giant worker would put them in a plastic bag; on this side of things the helpful Acme worker would ask me if I wanted paper, the only option.
- That Diet Coke I mentioned costs me 60 more cents on the city side, hardly a cause for complaint, just an observation.

But we know it's more than pop (or soda) and plastic bags, as important as that is. It's housing, and schools, and jobs, all based on an artificially constructed line.

I say all of that to help us to be mindful – Lent is a season of mindfulness, after all. And I say all of that to help us – and me – to be mindful of *this* place, nestled in a little corner of the city, *this* city, where if you go just a bit east or north those dividing lines come into play.

This congregation, its membership, draws from many communities, and the lines don't serve as a hindrance for us to get here. Philadelphia and its neighborhoods – Mt. Airy, Roxborough, Germantown, Chestnut Hill and more. Plus, Wyndmoor and Ft. Washington and Erdenheim and Lafayette Hill and Ambler and Glenside and Plymouth Meeting and many more. All of those places to get to *this* place.

I rehearse all of that to remind us that place matters. And I rehearse all of that to remind us that the places from which you come to get to this place matter, that this place matters, and the places to which we go when we leave this place matter as well. Matter to who we are. Matter to who God is. Matter to who God calls us to be in light of who God is.

That is to say, I believe it no accident that our history has unfolded in this place in a unique way, that were we even the same people in a different place that the story would be different.

Places shape us. That seems obvious, and maybe it is, but it's worth affirming anyway. I would say the same if we were gathered in Doylestown or Kalamazoo or Selma. But we are gathered here, in this place. So we take this unique place seriously, this place to which God has called us to worship and learn and connect and serve, and this place from which God launches us onto the world to live our lives in faith and hope. We carry with us, therefore, a certain responsibility, a stewardship, for this place and the needs that emanate from it.

Place matters in the story of faith. We hear in the Genesis reading an account of Abram's – before he became Abraham – vision. God comes to him and affirms God's protection. And then a promise. The promise of a child, in fact, many descendants, numbering as many as the stars. Followed by the promise of land, a home, a place. A complex ritual follows, but when Abram awakens, God

pronounces a covenant – land, land. That promise is more than a promise; it is a covenant, the kind of unshakable relationship that God establishes with God’s people. It takes on two forms, this covenantal promise, land *and* people, people and land, people and place.

Allow all of that to hover in your consciousness as we fast forward centuries, with Jesus in heightened conversation with the Pharisees, the religious leaders. They warn Jesus that Herod is coming after him. Jesus will have none of it. I have work to do, is his reply, healings and the like. Work to do, he says, and moreover, I cannot die now. I will not die now. It is impossible, he says, for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. So while Herod wants me dead, that will not happen until later, until I finish my work here, in the north, and head to the city.

And then this, a poignant combination of prophecy and indictment and lamentation. Of that city, the city where he will be executed, Jesus says “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.” Jesus views the city in all of its fullness, a place of beauty and faith and a place where corruption and faithlessness and violence are so deeply rooted. Jerusalem, Jerusalem.

And here’s what is so important – rather than condemn the city, dismiss it, curse it, he loves it. He loves the city, Jerusalem, the place that is so important, even as it is the place where his life will end.

Jerusalem is not only the place that kills the prophets, those who deliver God’s truth; it is the place that Jesus loves, and serves. “How often,” he says, “how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” How often, he says, have I sought to love you, redeem you, give you hope, and you have rejected me. And yet I will continue loving you, even to the end. Rather than succumbing to the prospect of fear, and death, he will ultimately end up in the city, where, fearless, he will face death in order to bring about the city’s redemption.

Chelsey Harmon writes that “Jerusalem represents the notion of God, it is the center of the Jewish religion and society. Jesus mourns for it...Sadly,” she says, “the picture of the people of God represented as the city of Jerusalem is that they do not want to be safe. They want the perceived sense of safety. They will join in

lock-step with the powers that seem to have the upper hand in the world instead of trusting that there is something bigger than this life.”

Jerusalem, the city, as place where God’s promise of faithfulness plays itself out, and, at the same time, a place where that promise is corrupted, distorted, for the sake of power and fear. And yet Jesus is unrelenting in his love for the city, and his insistence that it can be redeemed.

I do not think it too hyperbolic of a move to hear – when Jesus says “Jerusalem, Jerusalem” – to also hear “Kyiv, Kyiv,” or “Belfast, Belfast,” or even “Philadelphia, Philadelphia.” Not too hyperbolic of a move at all, because if anything, we have understood that place matters, that God gives us places, calls us to places, to care for them, places where we might live out our faithfulness.

And if anything, we have understood that Jesus loves the city and weeps over it, and yearns for its safety and well-being. How could he not then yearn for anything but that for this city as well, this city, this place, to which we have been called?

Jesus’ redemptive hope comes to every city, with Jerusalem as the surrogate for all cities. That must include this city, because we can think it no accident that we are here.

Peter Choi writes that “A vision of the city as a place where grace abounds has largely been absent from the Christian imagination of recent years. Urban ministry approaches have tended to view cities as places marked by compromised good at best and unchecked evil at worst. For those who have eyes to see, however,” Choi writes, “the city is also a site of boundless human ingenuity and possibility.” That is what Jesus saw in Jerusalem, and that is what we are called to see here, in Philadelphia, this place filled with promise.

What do we think of when we hear that word, “city?” Mark Lewis Taylor writes of the “trash-strewn urban field, showing blighted ground and foliage as well as the plight of homeless humanity upon it...urban life crumbling under the threats of alienated nature and alienated human groups.” Perhaps. But Taylor also casts a vision of “urban transcendence,” a “mobilized and imaginative resistance to class division and alienation.”

We are taking steps in that direction. Our commitments, whether writing a check or baking simple casseroles for and with places like PIHN and Face to Face and Germantown Avenue Crisis Ministry acknowledge the reality and seek to meet immediate need.

And there are next steps to take. We are now working to build deeper relationships with those partners, including West Kensington Ministry, because it is in relationship – people to people and place to place – where transcendence can happen and grace abound.

That will mean that the walls of this place are permeable, that this sanctuary is both a gathering place and a launching pad.

Becoming a Matthew 25 congregation was a step, acknowledging the intersectionality – a fancy word but a clear one – the intersectionality of racism and poverty and how we become more vital as a congregation the more fully and deeply we address those twin evils.

There are next steps to take, an important one being that what we call “social witness” here needs to be as front and center in our life together as anything else, that social witness is who we are, that our tagline – “an inclusive community of faith” – takes root and wing as we deepen our understanding of that word, inclusive, and its implications.

From our vantage point here, tucked into a corner of the city, with realities as we head north on the avenue and as we head south, we face choices, alternative sets of responses that have lived with the church since its very inception.

- We can ignore the city where we have been planted, floating above it, existing on a different plane.
- We can look at the city’s complex and profound problems and see them as insurmountable and shrug our shoulders, good intentions hampered by the scale of the needed response.
- We can look at the city and simply condemn it – an option many take.
- Or this. We can, with Jesus, look at the beloved city and weep over it.

And rather than condemnation or rejection or abandonment, we can – because place matters – move into it, toward it, knowing that the metrics of success and impact are elusive, knowing the possibilities of failure are high, knowing the risk, even if that risk falls far short of the risk Jesus took on.

In the book “Sabbath in the City,” Bryan Stone and Claire Wolfeich write: “A city is a complex combination of beautiful neighborhoods, thriving shopping areas, tree-lined boulevards, sprawling university campuses, friendly parks, vacant lots, graffiti-covered overpasses, boarded-up crack houses, and abandoned cars. Yet the Christian conviction is that just such a place is capable of being hallowed by God and of becoming a place where we meet God...”

So that when Jesus weeps over the city, we weep too. When he comes to the city, we do as well, and perhaps he will find us here already, loving and serving, weeping and laughing. Amen.