

Sermon on Luke 13:31-35
2nd Sunday in Lent, Feast of St. Patrick, March 17, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace....

It becomes more and more difficult to write sermons during the week before our Sunday morning worship, because more and more we find that tragic events happen which demand that we address them, as communities of faith, even more than the texts from holy scripture that we planned to preach from. It always seems to happen on a Friday or Saturday, a shooting at a place of worship where people in prayer are killed by a white supremacist shooter. Mother Emmanuel Church a few years ago, when Dylan Roof, a young white man, entered a church and shot African American Christians at a Bible study. Just a few months ago, a white terrorist shot members of the Tree of Life Jewish synagogue in Philadelphia on a Sabbath morning, and many of us gathered in local synagogues, like Mount Zion Temple in St. Paul, to grieve with our Jewish brothers and sisters. And now, on Friday morning in Christchurch New Zealand (late Thursday night our time), a white nationalist terrorist entered two mosques and shot 50 human beings dead while they were peacefully in prayer, leaving 50 more hospitalized. How can I preach on the gospel text alone, and commemorate Patrick, patron saint of Ireland as planned, when such tragic events occur? When anti-Semitism is on the rise, anti-immigrant rhetoric leads to deportations, detentions, and family separations of thousands on our southern border and in our own community of St. Paul, and Islamophobia leads to a bombing in 2017 of Dar-al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, vandalism at a mosque in Maplewood (a mile from my house), and the shootings two days ago in New Zealand, how can we go on with “church worship as usual”? Well we do pray, as a matter of faith and resistance to hate, but it surely changes our focus and raises the tension immeasurably. Because as a matter of faith, we gather today to worship, without weapons or security guards, with our backs to the door, bowing our heads to pray. It’s not only a matter of faith – it is also an act of solidarity with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors. So, it is with great irony we read the responsive Psalm 27:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evil doers close in against me to devour my flesh, they, my foes and my enemies, will stumble and fall. Though an army [of white supremacists] encamp against me, my heart will not fear, though violence rise up against me, my trust will not be shaken. One thing I seek...to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek God in the holy place. For

in the day of trouble God will give me shelter, hide me in the hidden places of the sanctuary, and raise me high upon a rock.” (Ps. 27) F

These recent tragic events, which affect all people of faith, give us a totally different context in approaching the scriptures we read, and new urgency to our prayers. The prayer for protection is now made real. I attended our local pastor’s text study at St. Paul-Reformation last Tuesday, and prepared as usual to write a sermon. We completed the printing of the worship service sheet, I did my background research on the texts, and read more about Saint Patrick of Ireland. But after hearing about the shootings Thursday night and Friday morning, I couldn’t write, or think about the texts, until I listened to the press conference put on by Muslim and Jewish faith leaders Friday morning. Then I looked up the addresses of all the local St. Paul mosques, and picked one to visit that was near my home, Assalam Mosque in Maplewood. I drove over there at noon, and was met at the entrance by a woman in a hijab, who greeted me warmly, and the caretaker, a Muslim gentleman, who was vacuuming the rugs in preparation for Friday prayers. The imam wasn’t there yet for the 1:00 prayer service. So I greeted him with the words “*Salaam ameikum*”, told him to call me if they needed anything, and left my card for the imam. It helps to learn those songs in Arabic when you go to the ELCA Youth Gathering, for sure! Then I went home, and began my sermon preparations.

So we have this short passage from Luke, chapter 13, a few chapters after the Transfiguration had taken place (which we read two Sundays ago). King Herod had been inquiring about Jesus, confused, because some had told him that John had risen from the dead, and Herod was sure he had beheaded him, so who could this Jesus be? At this time Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem, which was the destination for his mission, healing and teaching about God’s mercy for all people as he went on his way.

So we read, *At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am eating out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing....And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

Jesus would not be deterred in his mission to proclaim the good news of God’s mercy directly in the face of those who oppressed the people. His mission was to tell the religious authorities directly how they had made the Father’s house

of prayer into a den of thieves – and the Romans had made the Holy City into the capitol city of oppression for Jews, Palestinians, and Gentiles – with the help of people like King Herod, who profited personally from the power his Roman benefactors gave him – at the point of a spear. So much like Jerusalem today, so much like the accusation we can make against the institution of the Church today in many places, against our own leadership that steals from our national treasury, defrauds and lies to its own citizens, oppresses the poor and terrorizes immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers with arrest, detention and threats of deportation. How long, O Lord, will we endure such corruption? We take our inspiration from Jesus, who was not frightened by the threats against him, and continued his mission to Jerusalem. His followers had no idea what awaited him there, but Jesus knew.

Over the years, people of faith have faced many tyrants. The ancient people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, until God sent Moses to face down Pharaoh, and said “*Let my people go.*” In the time of Jesus, the people chafed under the Roman Empire’s occupation and treachery by King Herod, who enriched himself by the suffering of his own people. But Jesus went straight to Jerusalem to confront the exploitation of God’s people, and the perversion of Roman justice at the expense of the mercy of God. Jesus gave his life for the redemption of all people in the world – not just Jews, not just his followers and Christians. We have come to the conclusion that God’s mercy is for all people of faith, today including Muslims, Buddhist, and for all humankind.

Before recent events, I had intended to tell more of Saint Patrick’s story, the patron saint of Ireland. It is a good one to tell. Beyond the legends and the “Irish pride”, it is based on a story of courage. It began when Patrick, the son of Roman parents in Britain, was kidnapped from his village on the coast by pirates, taken to Ireland and sold into slavery. It was a violent change in his life, doing menial labor, such as herding livestock in desolate mountains, living as a stranger and an exile. His life was valued no more than the livestock he tended, hungry and far away from home. He was looked upon with hate, despised as a foreigner. In his desolation, he clung to his Christian faith, reciting the prayers he had learned as a youth. After six years he escaped across the sea, and finally made his way back home. He bore the scars of his long ordeal, but held a much deeper faith. Then he studied for the priesthood in Gaul, where he had a dream of Irish voices calling Patrick to “*Come and walk once more with us.*” So Patrick returned to the island that once had enslaved him, now as a bishop, where he served as missionary to Ireland for thirty years. The Irish once had killed Christians, or sold them as slaves, but now he baptized tens of thousands of the faithful, and founded a network of churches and monasteries. But the richness of his story is not in his successes, but in the faith that survived the injustice of his enslavement. He returned not for

vengeance, but to bring to Ireland the good news of God's mercy, reconciliation, and redeeming love. We will remember his words in today's creed.

Today, many centuries after Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland, and almost two hundred years since Irish folk fled famine and suffering to come to the United States, immigrants, refugees, and Muslims face persecution from people in America today, and threats from our own "King Herod". We had a "Muslim ban" just two years ago, which was battled in the courts and survives in discrimination against immigrants or travelers trying to come to America from certain countries. Our Muslim neighbors today face suspicion, stereotypes, and Islamophobia throughout America, even in Minnesota, as we have learned from our Muslim neighbors in recent years. White supremacy and terrorism is growing throughout the world and in America, encouraged by politicians who see political gain through raising false fears against our neighbors. It happens when Muslim children are bullied in school, female students have their hijabs removed by teachers, or Muslim males – even imams – are put on "no fly" lists by airlines for no reason except for their Muslim names. I became even more aware of such discrimination yesterday when I went to the Muslim Solidarity Gathering at Dar-al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, hosted by the Muslim Coalition of ISAI AH. I heard all of this from my new Muslim faith leader colleagues and from young Muslim students who witnessed to the community who came out to support them after the tragic shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand. Then we heard reminders of the ten stages of genocide, developed by Dr. Gregory Stanton, which are: #1 when people are categorized between "us and them"; #2 when people are given symbols, like Jews given yellow stars in Nazi Germany; #3 Discrimination, when certain groups of people are denied certain rights (like the Jews were stripped of citizenship in Nazi Germany, and undocumented immigrants are denied driver's licenses in Minnesota); #4 when human beings are dehumanized as vermin, insects, or diseases, like "shit-hole countries" referred to in recent years by people in power, or all Central-Americans are called drug dealers and criminals by our president. The other stages lead to stage #9 which is extermination, followed by #10 which is denial ("this never happened") – of the holocaust, for example. We are not there yet, but some say we are at #3 or #4.

But I do not want to leave you discouraged by our present prospects. Yesterday was a day of hope, and our scriptures – especially the gospel – leads us to hope. We have hope in God being with us, guiding us to truth and to life. God made a covenant with Abram, even when he was old and childless, that he would have many descendants. Moses went straight to Pharaoh, and said "*Let my people go!*" The apostle Paul wrote a letter of joy from prison, encouraging the Philippian church to follow his example and be transformed. Jesus continued on his road to

Jerusalem, where he confronted Herod, the religious authorities, and even faced the cross, and then was raised from the dead.

So brothers and sisters, when we hold to our faith, when we continue our worship even when we have so much to fear, kneel and close our eyes in prayer, when we know some congregations have suffered the worst violence imaginable, **WE HAVE ALREADY WON!** For we have kept the faith, and our fears will never prevent us from praying before our God, who has shown us steadfast love and endless mercy, who will always be with us, who gives us life! Thanks be to God! Amen.

For the 49 worshippers who were killed on Friday in Christchurch, New Zealand, by a shooter while they prayed in their mosque, and the many who still suffer from their wounds. Comfort their families with your love, and keep the survivors in their mosque strong in faith, despite their fears. Bring us together as people of faith throughout the world to be in solidarity and faith together, to guard each other's lives, and make us all free to worship without fear. Hear us, O God.

Keep us strong in faith in spite of fear, help us to oppose and end all Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant sentiment and racism in our community and nation. Hear us, O God, **your mercy is great.**

Sisters and brothers,

We gather for worship this Sunday morning just as our Muslim brothers and sisters in Christchurch, New Zealand did this past Friday. We were all shocked as a white supremacist terrorist entered two mosques, killing 49 people – adults and children as they prayed, wounding that many more. So today we pray that their souls may rest in peace, we pray for the comfort of their families, and for the healing of those still suffering from their wounds. We ask God's forgiveness for our acquiescence and ignorance of the sin of Islamophobia, for our fear of Muslims and for being silent as laws are passed that discriminate against them. We pray in confession today, and ask that God will help us to end the sins of hate against our Muslim neighbors, and guide us to reconcile with them, as they reach out to us in peace.