

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 13:31-35**

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Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is set in the context of the description of the Pharisees warning Jesus about Herod Antipas (as opposed to Herod the Great, an earlier tyrant). In telling the story, be aware that Jesus is addressing the Pharisees who came to warn him. Jesus is often in conflict with the Pharisees, but not this time. In this case, they are his allies against Herod. They have come to warn him that Herod is out to kill him just as he killed John the Baptist. So Jesus is first of all talking to us as if we were friendly Pharisees.

Then he addresses Jerusalem. His prayerful address grows out of the implicit prophecy that he will be killed in Jerusalem. The prayer is an expression of grief that Jerusalem rejected his offer of protection and his recommendation about the policies that Jerusalem should follow. The people do not listen to him any more than they listened to earlier prophets, and they will suffer the consequences: "their house is left to them."

In Luke's context, some of the consequences of Jerusalem's decision not to follow Jesus have already happened. The greatest disaster in the entire history of Jerusalem took place within 40 years after Jesus' death. The result of the Jewish War in 66-70 A.D. was that the temple was destroyed and the city was laid waste. The entire temple area was burned. Luke's story is written some 10 to 20 years after that great disaster, so Luke's listeners are hearing Jesus' prophecy in the context of something that they already know has happened. There is, therefore, great poignancy and power in Jesus' words for Luke's listeners.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is a reiteration of his mission and a prophecy that he will be killed in Jerusalem, not in Galilee. His instruction to those who warn him is, "Go and tell that fox..." In the ancient world, "fox" was a term used for those who are crafty. Clearly, Herod was a crafty man, a manipulator of the first order and utterly unethical. Jesus advises the Pharisees to tell Herod to bug off: "I'm going to Jerusalem; that's where a prophet is killed, not in Galilee."

The pronouncement of woe over Jerusalem is reminiscent of Jeremiah's lamentations. Jesus here speaks in the same spirit as Jeremiah weeping and lamenting over the destruction of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judea at the time of the Babylonian invasion some 600 years earlier. Jesus describes Jerusalem in relation to the people's response to their great prophets like Jeremiah, "You, Jerusalem, who killed the prophets and stoned those who were sent to you."

Who specifically does this statement about prophet-martyrs in Jerusalem refer to? There are a number of possibilities: the prophet Uriah who was killed by the king Jehoiakim

(Jeremiah 26:20-23), the attempt on Jeremiah's life (Jeremiah 38:4-6), the death of Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:20-22), and a later story of the martyrdom of Isaiah related in the Pseudepigrapha (*The Martyrdom of Isaiah*). Isaiah was sawn in two with a wood saw.

There are a number of stories of the deaths of "prophets of old" but none in which the prophet was stoned. The only major story about the stoning of a prophet that would have been known to Luke's listeners was the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). Stephen was chosen by the disciples to be in charge of serving the poor and the widows for the fledgling faith community. He worked miracles and argued eloquently with those who opposed the way of Jesus. This led to a hearing before the authorities. At his hearing he gave a long speech with a similar message to Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, followed by a vision of God and Jesus. He was then stoned to death in the presence of Saul of Tarsus. This story, also, would be evoked by the words of Jesus in his lament over Jerusalem.

The hen metaphor is a very interesting metaphor that Jesus uses to describe his own internal desire. He compares himself to a hen, a female chicken. He longed to take the people under his wings and protect them. The rejection of Jesus' care and of his teachings did have deadly consequences. The choice of war is in the background of the story about Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. This story anticipates the story of the Pilate trial, in which the people of Jerusalem reject Jesus. They implicitly choose Barabbas and the way of war, rather than the way of peace and reconciliation.

The destruction of Jerusalem hangs over this story. Jesus says, "your house is abandoned," which I think is a better translation than "left to you" in the NRSV. Is the house the temple? Is it the residences of Jerusalem? Maybe both. But clearly the main house in Jerusalem was the Temple. That loss continues to resonate in the lives of all those who love Jerusalem. The memory of the loss of the temple and the loss of Jerusalem is in the background of the woe and grief that is expressed in this story.

The choice facing the United States and the people of the world is implicit in this story: whether to follow Jesus and his way of peace and reconciliation, or to follow the myth of redemptive violence and invest our hopes in warfare rather than in God. That is the decision we are asked to make as evoked by this story.

