

Being the preacher this weekend here at St. Timothy's is bittersweet. I always look forward to the Rev. Roy Moore approaching me after each sermon, a smile on his face, shaking his head over the parts where I might've pushed a little; praising me for the teaching parts I got right, and always the pastor, encouraging me to keep on writing and exploring the gospel with each of you in this place. For this and so many other reasons, he will be missed.

Growing up, I believed that the gospels were written by the men for whom they were named; Matthew Mark, Luke, and John. And that they were men who hung out with Jesus, saw everything that happened, and wrote it down. I discovered in college, and then at seminary, that I was mistaken.

Three of the four gospels are in fact, much more like term papers, or research papers. They are collections – from a variety of sources – including oral tradition, writings, history and sayings, compiled by more than one person, in one school-of-thought or another, and preserved under one name. They were written decades after Jesus died, for the sake of informing, encouraging and affirming individuals and communities at the very beginnings of what came to be known as Christianity.

The opening of Luke's gospel, from which we are reading this season, says clearly that his is one of several attempts to help people understand what happened when Jesus was there in body, and what that means. He uses a literary construction similar to the Greek and Roman literature of his time. I'm not sure this is ever read in church, so here it is, the Gospel of Luke, chapter one, verse 1 – 4, and you may remain seated.

“Since so many have undertaken to compile an orderly narrative of the events that have run their course among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and ministers of the word transmitted them to us, it seemed good that I, too, after thoroughly researching everything from the beginning, should set them systematically in writing for you, Theophilus, so that Your Excellency may realize the reliability of the teachings in which you have been instructed.”

In today's selection from Luke's gospel, we're hitting the home stretch of the story. Jesus has been teaching, performing miracles, and is creating a stir. The Temple authorities wanted him stopped not only because he was drawing negative attention towards them, but he was suggesting that God's kingdom resides within each person, and there was also talk of him being the messiah. The Romans wanted him stopped not only because he was also questioning their authority, but because there was talk among some of his followers – of Jesus being the King.

Jesus was certainly aware that his public acts and activities put his life in peril. He had seen what happened to John the Baptist, who was killed by the roman authorities for doing much the same thing.

I mentioned that Luke's gospel was compiled from several resources – and the lament that Luke includes in this part of the story is rooted in the Jewish observance of Tisha B'av. There is a thread of longing across all of our readings today, which appears here most fully. Tisha B'av is a date on their calendar, the 9th of the month of Av, commemorating multiple tragedies, including the destruction of the temple centuries before. Luke puts these words in Jesus mouth because the listeners understand that kind of longing – longing for Jerusalem, her place and her people. Jesus uses this prayer because he knows what lies ahead for himself, and prays that it will restore his followers to God.

A prayer they might've recited reads, in part, "Console, O Lord, the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem and the city laid waste, despised and desolate. In mourning for she is childless ... her dwellings laid

waste, despised in the downfall of her glory and desolate through the loss of her inhabitants.... Legions have devoured her, worshippers of strange gods have possessed her. They have put the people of Israel to the sword... Therefore let Zion weep bitterly and Jerusalem give forth her voice... For You, O Lord, did consume her with fire and with fire will You in future restore her... Blessed are You, O Lord, Who consoles Zion and builds Jerusalem." [Abbreviated from the Nachem prayer.]

There is a folk story that suggests that not only do the Jewish People mourn for the Temple, but that the temple also mourns for them. It says that each year on the night of Tisha B'av. A sigh and a moan can be heard to emerge from the Western wall.

Jesus is longing for our restoration in this story. How many more prophets will cross our paths before we believe? How many have done so up to today?

It might be an interesting exercise to imagine – what if the task was put to us to tell the story of Jesus, to those who would listen, today? What source documents would we assemble to tell about God coming among us, teaching, loving, longing for, and even dying for, us? Of course we would likely begin with the scriptures we have already inherited. But what would we dare graft onto them to tell this story anew?

To inform, encourage, and affirm people of our time, who are also hoping to find meaning and new life in Christianity?

Would you include newer books, poems, photography and art? Would you include news clippings, pictures of people you love, tweets, emails, and facebook updates?

How would we tell the story afresh – proclaiming that god longs for us; would we use the image of God's great hen-like wings under which to seek shelter? Or perhaps we would use the image of a storm shelter, or a family table, or even a place like St. Timothy's, as somewhere to return, again and again, to that most universal and yet most intimate source of protection. Our readings also name those who would out fox us – evil doers, adversaries, enemies of the cross. Who are our adversaries today? What would we teach about distractions, addictions, longing, and power?

When you leave this service, returning to the wilderness of this second weekend of Lent, will your story, of the events that have run their course among us, be a part of letting the world know that God longs for us, and loves us?

Let's pray:

God, we ask for faith and for clarity, that our lives will combine to be a voice in the desert, to inform, encourage, and affirm those who travel with us along the way. *Amen.*

Heidi Carter Clark