



reLent: "reconsider"

Luke 13:31-35

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If you saw the sermon sign this week, I hope you got a good laugh at it. Depending upon how you read it, you might have understood it to say that Jenny McDevitt is preaching, and that the sermon title is "Reconsider." Unfortunately, it is entirely possible you understood it to say "Reconsider Jenny McDevitt." In light of this, I'm not going to ask any questions about your motivations or your presence today — I'm simply going to say: I'm glad you're here.

Our sermon series this season is called reLent — a bit of a play on words encouraging us to think through Lent differently than we have before. That is proving true for me. To relent is to be less severe, to relinquish; or to become more compassionate, to soften.

What if Lent looked something like that this time around? Not long ago I read a two line poem from Andrea Gibson: "We try hard to do good. / We should try softer." Growing up, I was taught that Lent was a time of fasting. A time of strictness. A time to be uncomfortable, that we might understand just a bit of the suffering Jesus endured. But I'm not particularly convinced that I understand that kind of suffering on any deeper level simply by denying myself something I enjoy. I worry the teaching of my childhood, while well intentioned, actually belittles Jesus' experience.

Lent is a time to remember that suffering.

It is a time to examine our lives, so that we might determine whether or not we demonstrate appropriate gratitude for the love that went all the way to the cross and then even further still.

Maybe, then, Lent can be a time to reflect upon how we love. And maybe the poet is right. I can't tell you everything this world needs right now, but gentleness and compassion are high on the list. You need only look at the front page of any newspaper or the lead story on any news website on any given day to know this is true.

In so many ways, I wonder if we need a softer Lent.

Our scripture today begins in chapter 13, but it is rooted in chapter 9. Verse 51 reads: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." This sets the tone for everything that follows. Pharisees tell Jesus that Herod is coming for him? Fine. Let him come. He's headed to Jerusalem, where they kill the prophets and stone the others? Fine. Let them do what they are going to do. Because Jesus' face is set toward Jerusalem, and nothing, not one single thing, is going to deter him. He is going, and that's all there is to it.

I have to tell you, I find a great deal of comfort in this.

I've never doubted that Jesus knew who he was. He grew up listening to his mother sing the Magnificat.¹ He preached in his hometown and nearly got thrown off a cliff for his effort. He couldn't have imagined things were going to get

¹ I have taken a bit of creative license with the text of Luke 1 here. Nowhere does scripture suggest Mary sang the Magnificat to Jesus after he was born ... but I imagine that a song that strong was song more than once.

better for him. He had to have known where this was going. But even still — sometimes I need to be reminded that Jesus did what he set out to do.²

I need to be reminded of this because our human inclination, far too often, seems to be the opposite. We give in or we give up. We let the difficulty or challenge of what lies ahead redirect our intentions. Because actually getting to where we want to go almost always means changing. Reconsidering our habits or our customs or our traditions. Reconsidering our relationships. Reconsidering our priorities. Our way of looking at the world. Our way of moving through the world, our way of looking at one another. Reconsidering our assumptions about why things are the way they are, and the responsibility we bear in the face of it all.

Back when I was in middle school, my brother loved to tag along when my friends came over. He thought it was exciting. My parents thought it was endearing. I thought it was the single most unjust thing any human had ever done to another.

One summer day, we were riding our bikes home from the pool when my friends and I made it through the crossing zone of an intersection, while my brother, who was younger and a bit slower, got stuck at the light. I knew we should wait, but instead I urged my friends on, and we went ahead home. Later that night, my mother asked me to apologize to my brother. Eventually I spit out, "I'm sorry you aren't fast enough to keep up with me."

This will shock you, but that was my mother had had in mind. She "suggested" I spend the next week reconsidering my attitude. But before you write that off as mere youthful immaturity or insensitivity ... the truth is, we adults do the very same thing, often on a larger scale, always with higher stakes. Thanks be to

God, in the moments when we are unable or too uncertain or just flat-out unwilling to summon our best selves forward, Jesus has already set his face toward Jerusalem, and he is not looking back. There is no any Herod, years ago or in this present day, that will sway him otherwise.

"Tell that fox," he says, "that I have every intention of doing what I was brought here to do. Tell that fox he can find me, he says, healing people and caring for people. Tell that fox," he says, "that I am busy gathering up my chirping little chicks."

Unfortunately, the fox does not and has not run away. The fox, to this day, is alive and well and present. He is wily and clever and smart. The fox runs fast with an agenda all his own. And he is not looking out for us. He is not looking to save us.

The fox is in the henhouse, don't you see?³Cancer takes over our bodies without any advance warning; dementia ravages our minds without any sign of remorse; anxiety takes hostage the spirits of even the youngest among us; depression tricks the soul of far too many.

The fox is in the henhouse, don't you see? Homelessness and hunger steal our dignity. Email flies into my inbox and notes show up in my mailbox: "Dear Pastor, I ate at your church last week. Thank you for feeding me. I hope to repay you sometime soon. Please know I wasn't always like this." And "Dear Pastor, Thank you for letting me stay at your church. I am trying to get back on my feet, so that maybe I can see my daughter again someday. Would you pray for me please?"

The fox is in the henhouse, don't you see? Over 50 innocent, faithful Muslims in New Zealand were gunned down in their place of worship, ranging in age from 3 years old to over 70 years old, the latest victims of sinful white supremacy, the latest victims of sinful gun

² I am indebted to Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching at Luther Theological Seminary, for this line of thinking: www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5295

³ Again, Karoline Lewis. Her use of this refrain in her column inspired my use of it in this sermon.

violence, the latest victims of our sinful fear of anyone who is not just like us.

The fox in the henhouse, don't you see? A scandal over college admissions erupts, with those who already have every advantage in this world found guilty of purchasing even more, the latest perpetrators of our sinful sense of entitlement, but also, possibly, their children the latest victims of our sinful understanding of how we measure a person's worth and how we define success and what we're willing to trade for it.

The fox is in the henhouse. And the fox thinks it has us cornered. Because what harm can a hen really do? Not much at all. The hen gathers and nurtures. The hen feeds and teaches. The hen gives everything — *everything* — she has to protect her young, and her own self is all she can offer.

The fox is strong and fast and cunning and has every reason to think he owns the day. But the hen is not on her own. The hen is there, Luke tells us, with her brood. And this is where the fox has no idea what trouble he is in, because the hen has gathered her brood, just like the Spirit, so very long ago, brooded over the darkness and the chaos. "Let there be light," God said, and life began with a bang and a bright light and brilliant burst of love. The hen has gathered her brood, friends, so while the outlook may appear grim now, while the fox may seem way too close for comfort, it is in moments like these that God has a habit of intervening and bringing forth life, again and again and again.

The fox is in the henhouse, but the fox does not stand a chance — not when it comes to injury, or harm, or hatred. Because the salvation of our God includes not only all of us, but everything that seeks to destroy us — including every incarnation of the slippery, sly fox. Jesus calls his death-dealing by name, but understands that underneath all the bravado, every fox is really more like a scared sheep searching for a shepherd. And the creator of the world, the

redeemer of the world, the sustainer of the world, cannot look away.

Prophets have been telling us from the earliest of ages that there will come a day when the Lord's house will be established in all places, when swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, when the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid; when the cow and the bear shall graze together, and even the fox and the hen shall seek shelter in one another, when we try not harder with one another, but softer, for all will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

This is news so good it will change our lives. But beloved, here is the deal. It is not enough to trust in this promised day and then live however we want, assuming God will make right everything we decline to worry about. It is not enough to trust in this promised day, unless we are willing to work for it, setting our own faces toward it, and not looking back.

We're baptizing four young people today. We owe our determined efforts to Luke and Meadow and Katharine and Wyatt. We owe our determined efforts to one another. We owe our determined efforts to ourselves. Above all, we owe our determined efforts to the God who brooded over the chaos back in the very beginning, the God who took a deep breath and took a big chance. We owe it to the God who set everything in motion and who today, tomorrow, and the next day, continues to set us on our way.

The tasks ahead are hard. The tasks are hard, but eventually, they will make us, and the world around us, softer. Gentler. More understanding. More compassionate. Soft, fertile ground is where new life takes root. And where new life takes root, anything and everything is possible.