

Sermon for Judika Sunday

Hebrews 13:12-14

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¹²So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Eighty-year-old Martha walked through her apartment one last time. She had lived here for fifty years. In this kitchen, she had baked more birthday cakes than she could now remember. She had sat by this window when she couldn't sleep. On this floor, she had once screamed during a terrible argument with her husband. Her children had learned to crawl on this floor.

Now there were only empty rooms before her. The moving truck was gone. The keys lie on the windowsill. She stood in the middle of the empty living room. On the wall was still a lighter patch where the cross had hung for decades. Now it was just a shape of lighter paint—an imprint of what had been. Martha cried, quietly. Then she closed the door.

Outside on the street, her daughter was waiting in the car. In the back seat: a suitcase, a plant, a bag of books. "Is that really all?" her daughter asked. "That's all," Martha said. Then, quietly, almost to herself: "It's amazing how little you need."

What Martha experienced in that moment is ancient. God's people have always known this. Or rather, they have always had to learn it anew. Israel was in the desert, on the move for forty years. No permanent home, no permanent city. The Ark of the Covenant was carried on their shoulders. Not in a temple, but on the move. God Himself was not a God of fortresses, but a God of the journey. A pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. Repeatedly we hear the words in the Bible, "Come," "Go," "Follow me." Never standing still. Repeatedly, there is the temptation to look back: Lot's wife before Sodom and Gomorrah, the meat pots in Egypt, the familiar. They wanted what they knew, even if it was slavery. Some prefer slavery with a fixed schedule to freedom in uncertainty.

This was exactly the case with the recipients of Hebrews. They were Jews, and now wanted to return to Judaism, back to the Law. They were Christians but couldn't quite come to terms with the God of the Way. Some wanted to adapt the Gospel to the static Law. Others had not understood that salvation and blessedness do not happen all at once, but along the way. It is precisely in this situation that Hebrews presents a remarkable image that points to the essence of Christianity. The image comes from the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, there was a sin offering once a year. For this, the sacrificial animal had to be brought to the most holy and inaccessible place. That is, to the deepest place of God's presence, to the very center. That was only one part of it. The second step was just as crucial: the animal had to be taken out of the camp and completely burned there. If this were not done, the holy would be mixed with the unclean and the sacrifice would be incomplete.

Jesus Christ walks precisely this path, from the very center to the very outskirts. Christ is the only one whose blood has entered the Holy of Holies, into the immediate presence of God. He is the High Priest who passed through the curtain and tore it in two. That is the absolute center. At the same

time, His body dies in the most despised, unclean, and outcast place: outside the city walls, at the place of the executed and cursed, on the hill of Golgotha. That is the absolute outside.

This is exactly how Jesus mediates for us. He is wholly with God and wholly with us. There on Golgotha, this perfect union of God and humanity takes place. First, with the cross of Jesus, something happens between God and Jesus alone. Jesus brings the blameless sacrifice to God, and God says “yes” to it. This “yes” is in heaven, but it does not remain there. Rather, it is at the same time connected to us here on earth. Jesus is wholly with the Father and shows Him His wounds; His humanity goes with Him into heaven. At the same time, Jesus holds up our suffering with His nail marks. What Jesus presents there to God is our cross. Our weakness. Our sin. Jesus, as High priest, utters His final word over all these things. Can we bear the God-forsakenness of the cross? Can we bear the fact that Jesus brings us salvation, but not immediately and not right away?

Hebrews urges us to go out to where Christ is. That is, outside the city walls. This does not mean that we must die on the cross as a sacrifice just as Christ did. It does mean, however, that our lives and our hopes are sealed out there on Golgotha. When Hebrews urges us to go out, it implies that there is a very real danger that we might remain inside. It means that we would adapt Christ to our circumstances and habits. We would even adapt Him to our prejudices. Christ would then be merely a means to an end. We would only accept Him halfway. We would accept Him as a good role model, as a miraculous healer, as a moral compass. If we were to bend Jesus to fit our needs here inside, the sacrifice would be worthless. Instead of leaving judgement to God, we would presume to judge sin, death, and the devil ourselves. We do this, for example, when we say, “God must surely be satisfied with me and my life!”

Christ walked the path from the very depths to the very heights. He walked the entire way. Hebrews describes this path of our Lord with the words, “He endured the shame...” and then it adds, “We must bear His shame outside the gate.” This shame is no romantic adventure, but it means that we have something to lose. It costs something. It means nothing other than that we can easily bear—or easily give up—much of what belongs to us in life. It means we pin our salvation on none other than Jesus alone.

What Martha experienced with tears in her eyes when she had to give up her home to move into a nursing home, we must all experience one way or another. It can be challenging and bitterly painful to repeat this phrase, “We have no lasting city here.” We cannot hold onto anything. Not even time and the happiest of moments. As I grow older, I notice a tendency in myself to settle into a routine. The familiar feels safe. We feel secure in it. That is human. That is understandable. Yet it can also become a form of inner stagnation. We come to terms with what is unsatisfying. We call it maturity, but sometimes it is simply weariness. The Gospel keeps us young not because it takes away our past, but because it tells us, “The best is yet to come.”

The Gospel always has a door that opens outward. We seek the heavenly city. We reach out towards it. Whoever goes out to Jesus (that is, outside the city) does not fall into an abyss or hopelessness, nor does he fall into naivety or utopianism. No, quite the opposite. He finds solid ground beneath his feet. He finds a place where he can remain: a heavenly city. Hebrews speaks these words of hope into our world. Heaven lies before us, yet it can already be felt. The sight of the goal before us transforms our lives here and now. Something of Jesus is transferred into our real life on earth and gives us hope.

Martha looked at her few belongings in the back of the car. Even she herself did not quite understand at first the words that then followed from her lips. She looked ahead and said, “Those who carry heavy luggage look at the luggage. Those who travel light look ahead. That’s not poverty. That’s

an attitude that makes us rich.” Martha would meet new people at the nursing home. Her cross, too, would find a new place in her new home. Repeatedly and more regularly, she experienced those moments she recognized as a deep truth: The longing for the place where the soul finds rest. This longing is the place where a window opens over our lives and reaches to heaven, to Jesus. Amen.