

Luke 23:27–31
Holy Wednesday
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
March 27, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This Holy Wednesday evening we consider a distinctive element in the Passion account according to St. Luke, Jesus's response to the weeping women in Luke 23:27–31.

And there followed Him a great multitude of the people and of the women who were mourning and lamenting for Him. But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Thus far our sermon text. The daughters of Jerusalem wept for Jesus. Earlier in St. Luke, in chapter 19, Jesus wept over Jerusalem as He drew near to the city. He said to Jerusalem: "the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. . . because you did not know the time of your visitation" (19:41–44). Jesus also warned in chapter 21: "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains . . . Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people" (21:20–24). In both cases, and then here as well, Jesus is speaking about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. Jesus is warning about the imminent punishment that is coming upon Israel for rejecting the Messiah.

The women wept because they saw how cruelly Jesus was being treated. They saw the pain and suffering He was undergoing. The text doesn't tell us how many women there were. But their number must have included the women who we regularly find with Jesus. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Sussanah, Salome, and Mary the Mother of our Lord. Jesus had many disciples besides the Twelve. And these disciples, including many women, mourned when they saw our Lord's

suffering, just as you weep with those who weep. It's called "sympathy," which means "suffering with." When you see the pain of someone else, it's hard not to feel some of it yourself.

During the season of Lent, and especially during Holy Week and most of all on Good Friday, it's common for Christians to feel sympathy for Jesus in His suffering and death. Many tears are shed at the Tenebrae service on Good Friday. People share in the suffering when they listen to Bach's St. John or St. Matthew Passion or when they watch "The Passion of Christ." It can be hard not to get taken up into feeling for the suffering of an innocent victim like our Lord Jesus Christ.

But Jesus says: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." The point of Jesus's suffering and death is not to evoke an emotional response from us. In books and movies it's called "catharsis" when strong emotions are stirred up in a kind of purifying way. The Passion of Jesus is not a sob story to make you feel better by getting the tears out, or by making you feel something in an otherwise mundane life. The suffering and death of Jesus are cathartic in a different sense, in that they purify you from your sins. You are declared pure for the sake of His purging. You are washed by the blood that flows from His veins. You are cleansed by His humiliation and death because that's when He was paying for all your sins and making you right with God the Father. Don't weep for Jesus. Weep for your sins which caused His suffering.

Jesus tells the women not to weep for Him but for themselves and for their children because of the judgment that is coming upon Jerusalem. A generation later, Jerusalem would be surrounded by the Romans. The Temple and the city would be destroyed and thousands upon thousands would be slaughtered. According to the historian Josephus, and as prophesied in the

Old Testament, mothers in desperation would eat their own children. Jesus tells the women not to weep for Him but for themselves and for their children because of the suffering they will endure.

Times would get so tough, people would say: “Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!” The inability to have children was always seen in a negative light, especially in the Scriptures. Today, at least in the West, people welcome barrenness with joy. Children are seen as a burden, a hindrance to the good life. That’s how far our society has drifted from Christianity. Selfishness rules the day. What Jesus is referring to, though, is the suffering that will come when Jerusalem is lost. People will say: “Blessed are the barren,” because the pain of seeing one’s own children suffer would be too great. It would add to the immense suffering already taking place. And people would begin to say to the mountains “fall on us” and to the hills “cover us.” It would be better to be buried alive or crushed by stones than to endure the torment to come.

The destruction of Jerusalem in all its horror is a picture of the end of the world. That’s why Jesus’s earlier weeping and lamenting over Jerusalem is couched in descriptions of the Last Day. We get the same language in Revelation 6:14–17. When the sixth seal was opened, there was an earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars fell to the earth. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” The destruction of Jerusalem is a picture of the destruction of the entire world on Judgment Day.

Jesus continues: “For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” What Jesus means here is something like this: “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” (1 Peter 4:18). If Jesus, though innocent, suffered so much, what of those who are guilty? If He undeservingly suffers the wrath of God, what will happen to those who deserve God’s wrath? If they burn and torture the righteous branch that is green and full of life, how much more so will the dry limbs be broken apart and burned in the fire? Jesus is calling for repentance. Don’t just look at our Lord’s suffering and death with sympathy. See on the cross the result of your sin. Repent. Weep not for Jesus, but for your sins that caused His suffering. Repent and turn to the Lamb, who loved you unto death.

Jesus is the tender shoot coming forth from the stump of Jesse, a branch from his roots that bears much fruit (Is. 11:1). He is the Tree of Life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. The vine was torn down and burned in the fire, but He rises again and continues producing. Jesus is the vine, and in Him you are the branches. Once you were dead twigs, but He has made you alive together with Him, that you might bear much fruit in keeping with repentance. Weep for yourselves, but also look to the new heavens and the new earth, to Jesus Christ, the Tree of Life. Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with you, and you will be His people, and God Himself will be with you as your God. He will wipe away every tear from your eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for in Jesus Christ, the former things have passed away (Rev 21). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Magnificat.