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Sermon 6 March 2022

Title: Give it Up for Lent: Gathered Up

- Good morning church—what a beautiful week it has been here in Largs—I hope you’ve had an opportunity or two to get out and enjoy this Springtime weather—Pastor Tasha and I certainly have—we’ve been seaglass hunting and wild garlic foraging in the sunshine—and on Thursday night we had the privilege of attending the Largs Amateur Operatic Society’s production of Fiddler on the Roof—and I know that some of you were there too and you probably enjoyed it as much as we did—some of my favourite songs are in that musical and it was great to hear them performed live.
- Another one of my favourite songs is that little piece of music you heard at the beginning of the sermon—it’s from a song performed by jump blues musician Louis Jordan—he and his band were one of the most popular musical acts in the US during the 1940s—but that song is about a farmer who goes out at night to check on the farm and he hears a noise coming from the henhouse and so he calls out “Who’s there?”—and a voice answers him saying “they ain’t nobody here but us chickens”—that song went to number 1 in the US around Christmastime in 1946--and I’ve heard that phrase all my life—they ain’t nobody here but us chickens—apparently it didn’t originate with that song but in a joke that had been published in 1908 about a chicken

thief. But it's funny because that voice can say "they ain't nobody here but us chickens" but the voice itself lets us know that there is in fact somebody else in the henhouse—and that spells trouble. And so you've got to be careful who gets in

- I remember way back in 2012, about 10 years ago—Pastor Tasha and I hadn't yet moved to our farm, but in the back yard of our little cottage in North Augusta, South Carolina I built a chicken coop and a chicken run—I had a lot of fun designing it and building it—our first two chickens were named Pris and Roxie and they were Barred Rocks, so we put a sign that read "Barred Rock Hotel" over the little narrow door that the chickens used to get in and out—I used all these crooked lines to give it a kind of cartoonish look—and I thought that it would be easier to build a coop with all these crazy angles and unconventional shapes—things that weren't square or straight, but do you know it's a whole lot harder to make a building that looks whimsical and playful and fun than it is to make it straight and square and boring—there's probably a lesson to be learned there but I'm not sure what it is yet—but anyway, the whole space was about 600 square feet so it was a good size, all protected with wire and fencing so predators couldn't get in, because the last thing you wanted was for a fox or some other varmint to get into the henhouse—and there were a great many threats in the neighbourhood--there was a hawk that lived in a pine tree next door, and there were possums and raccoons and snakes—and we'd lose a chicken or two every now and then and when we did, we'd address whatever weakness

they'd found in our defences—those predators would make the most of an opportunity, like we saw that the Devil does a couple of weeks ago—and when that happened we'd fortify the structure—that's also what we do when we pay attention to spiritual discipline and grow and mature in our faith—but not to get off track, on one side of that coop there were what are called “nesting boxes” and there was a door you could open to get to the nesting boxes—that's where the hens would lay their eggs, and so we could collect eggs each day—but if there was a rooster in the picture, we could let the hens sit on their eggs and hatch them out---and that's what's happened in this video—here's a hen who has been sitting on these eggs and they're starting to hatch—and one chick decides he wants to see the world, so he escapes, and when he does Tasha tries to help him back to safety, and Mama hen gives her a little peck because she's got this—and so she lifts her wing and gathers that chick back under it—and you'll see some other eggs under there too—and they'll become chicks that the mother hen keeps protected—and they'll grow and eventually they'll look like her and act like her and they'll produce offspring as well—if they stay under the protection of her wings at this crucial time in their development—but if they don't, if one or more of them should refuse to be gathered under her wings, then they're in danger—particularly if there were a predator in the coop—a fox in the henhouse—because if that were the case then it wouldn't take long before that house was empty—it wouldn't be long until it was desolate and barren and lifeless.

- Today we are continuing our Lenten sermon series called “Give it Up for Lent,” and in today’s sermon we’ll be looking at the 13th chapter of Luke’s gospel, and today’s sermon is entitled “gathered up,” for reasons that will become clear as we go along.
- Our scripture today is located at the end of Luke’s 13th chapter—verses 31 through 35 are the final verses of this chapter, and before we look specifically at these 5 verses, let’s back up just a bit and put them into context. It’s always a good idea to think about scripture not just as a single solitary unit, but to consider its place in the larger narrative, and how it fits into the story that is being told.
- And the story that Luke is telling, as I’m sure you’ll remember from our “Meet the Gospels” series—is two-fold. Unlike Mark or Matthew or even John, Luke’s work is not only about the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus, because that’s only the first part—the second part of the story that Luke is telling takes place in the book of Acts, and it is the story of the way that the Holy Spirit gathers the people of God together and moves and acts through the early church--and the way that the disciples and other followers of Jesus live out their calling to be a part of the Body of Christ, to live like Jesus, so that they and the church look like Jesus and act like Jesus and bear fruit—adding to the flock--- producing offspring who carry on the work of the Kingdom, first in Jerusalem and then into all the world.
- And so as we read any passage in Luke’s gospel, it is always a good idea to ask how what we’re reading there looks forward to what is coming in the

Book of Acts—because we find very often that Luke is foreshadowing what is to come and making intentional connections between the two parts of his work.

- Now, at the beginning of chapter 13 of Luke's gospel, Jesus has been travelling from town to town and throughout the countryside, teaching and healing and telling parables, and as he's doing so Luke tells us that Jesus becomes more and more direct in his critique of those religious leaders known as the scribes and the Pharisees—and at the end of chapter 11, Jesus just calls them out directly when he's invited to dine at the house of a Pharisee, and Jesus doesn't wash his hands before dinner and that surprises everybody—and while they're clutching their pearls Jesus repays their alleged hospitality by calling the Pharisees and the scribes, the lawyers, fools and hypocrites—he says they're full of greed and wickedness even though they present themselves as clean on the outside—Jesus says that they pay attention to little detailed rules like tithing herbs but they forget the big important matters like justice—he says you don't help people understand the law, in fact you hinder them from understanding because you don't even understand it yourselves—and you call yourselves experts—and then he goes even further, and says that when God has sent prophets and apostles, they've killed them—and they've been doing that since way back at the beginning, all the way up to the present time—and Jesus says all the blood of those murdered prophets is on the hands of the present generation—those folks he's talking to—and you can imagine that they didn't like that much at

all, that they were offended and insulted--and by the end of chapter 11 Luke tells us clearly that the Pharisees are hostile toward Jesus and are looking for an opportunity to entrap him.

- And now I just want to point out a couple of things that happen in chapter 13 before we get to our scripture for today.
- First, Luke begins chapter 13 with the phrase “at that very time”—and the word Luke uses for “time” is the same one that he used back in chapter 4 when he said that when the devil had finished testing Jesus, he departed until an opportune time—the Greek, you may remember is Kairos—an opportune time—and here at the beginning of chapter 13 Luke uses it again—kairos, an opportune time. And Luke has just told us that, like the Devil in chapter 4, these certain scribes and Pharisees are scheming to entrap Jesus—to put him to the test—when they get the opportunity.
- And so in verse 1, Luke tells us that at this Kairos, there were some present who told Jesus about some Galileans who were offering their sacrifices at the temple—we don’t know which temple—but wherever it was, Pilate—we can assume it probably wasn’t Pilate himself but soldiers under his command—burst into the temple and kill the Galileans and as Luke puts it “mingle their blood with their sacrifices.” Now we don’t know why this happened, and we don’t know whether the folks who relayed this story to Jesus were Pharisees or not, but we can assume from the way Jesus answers them that they think that this happened because the Galileans were guilty of some great sin, and that their murder, even taking place in a place of holiness and sanctity which

is desecrated by the presence of these Romans, not to mention by the brutality of their actions, was a kind of divine retribution for their sins. And they are trying to get Jesus to either agree that this is the case, or to side with Pilate, or to condemn Pilate's actions, any of which could present them with an opportunity to call him out as somehow outside of the Law—either the law of the Temple or the Law of the Land.

- But Jesus doesn't take a side in the way they want him to—he says instead “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Unless you repent, you will perish. Jesus is acting in the role of prophet here—calling God's people to repentance and warning of judgement if they don't. And Jesus adds one more example of a tower that fell and killed 18 people—he asks-- do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? And reminds them again--5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’
- And so we see Jesus. just as John the Baptist had done, calling people to repentance and warning of judgement—and he does this in response to a story about the way Roman authorities infiltrate the temple and slaughter those inside and by telling a story about the collapse of a structure and referring to the sinfulness of those living in Jerusalem.
- So this is part of the background that leads to today's scripture, but I want you to notice one other incident that happens just before we get to verse 31

- In verse 22 Luke tells us where Jesus is headed—he writes “Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.”
- Now Jerusalem is not just any city. And Luke doesn’t mention Jerusalem just for the sake of geography, because for the culture of the time and for Luke’s gospel as well, Jerusalem is THE city. It is the center of the world—the axis mundi—that place where heaven and earth and the underworld come together—it is the place where Solomon’s temple is—or at least it used to be Solomon’s temple—now it’s Herod’s temple—and Jerusalem is that place to which pilgrims travel for Passover and all the other festivals—and it is the place where the crucifixion and resurrection will take place—and the place from which the church will grow, as Luke puts it, “first in Jerusalem and then into all the world.” So the fact that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem is much more than just a detail here.
- And no sooner has Luke told us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, he tells us that someone asks whether only a few will be saved, and Jesus replies with this: ‘Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, “Lord, open to us”, then in reply he will say to you, “I do not know where you come from.” 26 Then you will begin to say, “We ate and drank with you (remember that dinner with the scribes and Pharisees back in chapter 11), and you taught in our streets.” 27 But he will say, “I do not

know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!" 28 There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. 29 Then—now catch this--then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. 30 Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.'

- As he heads toward Jerusalem, Jesus paints a very ominous picture of folks who think they're first in line for the Kingdom who find that they are last—and of folks who think they've got the inside track but who find that they are locked out, that they are not allowed to gather with the prophets of old and all those from the east and west and north and south—because they are evildoers—and they don't get a seat at the dinner table in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' words are prophetic here—and we are reminded of the way that chapter 13 started, with a warning to repent or perish.
- And it is here that we arrive at our passage of scripture for today. Just 5 verses, sometimes referred to as Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. But these 5 verses contain a powerful message, not only for those who heard Jesus' words, and for those who first read Luke's story, but also for the church, also for the world, in 2022 as well.
- And the way I want us to think about these 5 verses is this: in these 5 verses, Luke uses a form of the Greek word "theló" three times. Now the word "thelo" means to desire or to want something—and there are 3 characters mentioned here who want or desire something—those 3 characters are

Herod, and Jesus, and Jerusalem—and as we consider what it is that each of these want or desire, I believe we can arrive at a meaningful message that the Holy Spirit has for us this morning. So let's just briefly walk through each of these three.

- The first want or desire—the first *thelo*—I want you to notice is this—Herod WANTS to kill Jesus. This is the news that the Pharisees in verse 31 bring to Jesus “at that very hour.” Of course this is hardly news—Luke doesn't mention it but Matthew has told us that Herod has been trying to get rid of Jesus since his birth—and Luke has told us what Herod did with John the Baptist after he called him out for all the evil things he had done—that is, after John's prophetic words called for repentance from him—Herod locked him up in prison and later beheaded him—and Herod has heard those who say that Jesus is John the Baptist brought back to life, or Elijah heralding the end of the world—but at any rate, it is clear that Jesus is a threat to the Empire, and so Herods and Caesars who want to keep the peace, the Pax Romana, and their power and authority intact, need every once in a while, to round up the troublemakers—to gather them up and get rid of them—and so imprisonments and torture and execution were not unusual exceptions in the way that Roman authority was exercised—they were the rule. Oppression and violence and threat of death are remarkably effective methods of control.
- And of course, someone like Jesus who publicly criticizes the religious leaders, who shakes up the social hierarchy by forgiving sins and healing people and casting out demons, making the unclean clean and changing their

social status—setting the captive free—such a person is a threat to the occupying forces’ authority—not to mention a person like Jesus who tells people not to worry about food or clothing or money, that God will protect them and provide for them—who tells them that they can give their possessions to others without worry that they will fall into poverty, who tells them to love their enemies, to treat everyone equally, who suggests that prostitutes and tax collectors might be more righteous than the religious and legal authorities—such a person is a threat to the system, to the status quo—and the reason such a person is a threat is because the system, the Empire, Herod, Caesar, the invading and conquering and occupying force relies upon the foundation of dependence—upon the idea that those under their rule are dependent upon them for their safety, and their protection, and their livelihoods, and the peace that they enjoy—that Pax Romana—

- I’m reminded of a scene from a Monty Python movie that’s set in 1st century Judea in which some Hebrew protestors are plotting against the Romans and one of them says “What have the Romans ever done for us?” And they all say yeah—what have the Romans ever done for us?
- And then one of them says, “the aqueduct?”—and the rest say, oh yeah fine, the aqueduct—and then another says, “sanitation?”—and they all say “oh yeah, sure” and then it starts, and they all start listing things that the Romans provided for them until finally the leader says “Yeah but apart from but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation,

roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?”

- And someone says, “Brought peace?”
- And that’s a funny skit but it’s a reminder that the Roman government built a culture of dependence in which as long as you paid your taxes and obeyed the laws and were content with your place in the societal hierarchy and acknowledge Caesar as your Lord and Saviour and didn’t rock the boat, you wouldn’t be beaten or imprisoned or executed. The government made sure you had all you needed—as long as you stayed in your proper place, of course
- As a matter of fact, the Romans had even rebuilt the temple where the Jews would gather, and it was a glorious sight to behold.
- And so not only would Herod have wanted Jesus out of the picture, folks with authority and status in society would have too, like the Pharisees. They were quite satisfied with the way things worked for them—and the reason they worked out so well for them was because of their dependence and cooperation with the Roman government—they enjoyed its provisions and its privileges and protections—and its Temple. But as Luke’s readers would almost certainly have known, the Roman government was a fickle provider, and they destroyed the temple in the year 70, just a few decades after this conversation that Luke describes between these Pharisees and Jesus—and if you think about Jesus’ response to them—it’s as if he saw that coming.

- Because Jesus doesn't say, "Herod wants to kill me?" well then let me change my itinerary—I was on my way to Jerusalem, but I better take a little detour—maybe spend a few weeks over in Joppa, I hear it's lovely this time of year—no, he says to the Pharisees, "you go tell Herod that I'm going to keep right on doing what I'm doing—casting out demons and performing cures—and on the third day I'll be finished—we know what he means by that—he's talking about the crucifixion and resurrection—and that's also what he's talking about when he says—I must be on my way to Jerusalem, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem—and that's sort of a confusing thing for our modern ears to hear, but it emphasizes what Jesus says next—"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"—Here Jesus echoes the language he used back in chapter 11 when speaking to the scribes and Pharisees—when God sends you a prophet, you kill them—
- so what Jesus is saying to these Pharisees when he tells them to go back to Herod and then says that Jerusalem kills the prophets is that they're not fooling anyone because they're in cahoots with Herod—they can try to pass the buck and say "Herod wants to kill you," but the fact is that they are complicit—Herod's authorities may provide the gun, but they're pulling the trigger.
- Now these next two "thelos"—these next 2 wants or desires we're going to consider together because they're connected—"wants" number 2 and 3—Jesus wants to gather his children together, but Jerusalem doesn't want to be

gathered up. And this is where the deeper meaning of Jesus' words really gets interesting.

- After calling Jerusalem the city that kills the prophets, Jesus says “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”
- So Jesus wants to gather His people, God's people, the children of Jerusalem, together—like that hen we saw in the video, protecting them under His wings as they grow and mature—Jesus is referring to Psalm 91 here, where we read “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;”-- and it is not lost on me that it is Mothering Sunday today, and here we have a maternal image—an image of God as mother—so that is what Jesus wants, to gather his children-- however, what Jerusalem, what the Pharisees, want is to NOT be gathered together under God's wings, and because of that Jesus says, “See your house is left to you.” The word there for house is *oikos*, and it can also mean “a building.” That is, your house, your building is empty, desolate like the wilderness.
- Why doesn't Jerusalem, why don't these Pharisees, want to be gathered up under God's wings, under the wings of Jesus? I would suggest it is because they are enjoying the protection and provision of Herod--because they have been tempted by the same offer that Satan offered Jesus in the wilderness—that of power and authority and wealth and luxury—remember how ornate and extravagant Herod's temple in Jerusalem is—they don't want to give that up—but both Luke and Jesus know that in time they will give that up when

the temple is destroyed in just a few years. But for now these religious leaders are enjoying the benefits that come with allegiance to the Empire—an allegiance that John makes clear in chapter 19 of his gospel, when the chief priests declare, “We have no king but the emperor!”

- I was reading an article this week about the way that the war in Ukraine has caused a split in the Orthodox church, and that article provided some interesting historical perspective in two sentences that caught my attention—they read “After the 1917 Russian revolution, Soviet leaders began liquidating the Russian Orthodox Church (liquidating sounds like a euphemism to me). But Stalin revived it after Hitler's invasion of Russia in World War Two to rally society.” To rally society—And I was reminded of the way that religion, the way that the church, can fall victim to being used for political ends, both through threat of persecution and penalty and also through promise of gain and power. This has happened time and time again throughout history. Certainly Dr. Martin Luther King was correct when he said that the church must be the conscience of the state and never its tool-- the church must never lose its prophetic voice, never stop proclaiming the gospel of repentance and forgiveness, never stop crying out for righteousness and justice and mercy and peace or it will fall into irrelevance-- and deservedly so—kyrie eleison
- And so when Jesus tells these Pharisees that their house is empty, I believe that He is referring to the emptiness of Herod's temple, which has become a

hollow monument that testifies not to allegiance to God but to the Emperor, their Lord and Saviour.

- That sentiment is amplified when we remember that at the beginning of Chapter 13, Luke tells us about the Roman government's desecration of the temple and the fall of a structure in Jerusalem—I think that Jesus is here foreshadowing the destruction of Herod's temple, as well as suggesting that it has become a desolate place.
- Now I want you to notice this—not only does Jesus refer to himself as a hen, and the children of Jerusalem as chicks, but when he tells the Pharisees to report back to Herod, he identifies him as an animal as well—a fox—and so I think Jesus is saying to these Pharisees not only that there's a fox in the henhouse—but that fox, the present emperor and those before him, designed and built it for them—and so it's not surprising that it's desolate and barren and lifeless and soon to be destroyed. There's been a fox in that henhouse.
- But there is another gathering place. The word that Jesus uses when He says he wants to gather his children under his wings is "episynago"—and the root word there is "synago"—that's where the word synagogue comes from—and so Jesus' words remind us that being gathered together under God's wings is being in the synagogue and has little to do with being in some specific building—we certainly learned that 2 years ago when lockdown forced us to close the doors of our church building.
- And so Jesus is suggesting that even if the actual temple is empty and desolate, even if it is destroyed, he wants to gather His people under His

wings—under his provision and protection as he Himself becomes the synagogue—the temple—and it is not without a certain degree of irony that in all four gospels Jesus says that the temple will be destroyed and raised up again in three days—because on the third day his work will be finished—and a temple not made by human hands will provide a gathering place for the children of God. And it will be a temple that testifies to the power of love and not the love of power.

- In the last verse of our passage, Jesus says “you won’t see me until the time comes when you say “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” looking forward to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem—and so we look forward to Palm Sunday, and the events of Holy Week, and finally to Easter—but Luke I think challenges us to look even further than that, and to think about what is coming after the resurrection—when the people of God from the north and south and east and west are gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost— and they all hear the gospel in their own native language as the sound like the rush of a violent wind sweeps through the crowd—I would suggest that is not only the sound of tongues of fire but also the brush of wings, gathering together the children of Jerusalem—children who will be protected, and provided for, and who will grow and mature to look and act like their Mother and produce offspring as the church grows and expands from Jerusalem into all the world.

- Today, in 2022, the Holy Spirit is still gathering the people of God into the body of Christ-- our temple, our synagogue—and under the wings of God we find protection, and provision, and purpose, when we are gathered up.