Matthew 23:37-39

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

For the past few weeks, we have been talking about Christ the Healer. You see, we were not created for pain. We were not created for suffering. We were not created for death. We were created for joy, for love, for relationship with God. God formed us into God’s very image. God placed us in paradise that so that human kind could walk with and speak with, and be in unencumbered relationship with God. But from the very beginning, things began to go wrong. Death almost immediately entered the scene and with it came pain, hurt, and sorrow.

When Christ came to us, he came to fulfill the prophesies which seek of the healing that would accompany the messiah. The prophets told of one who would come that would offer healing. The blind who would see, hearing would be restored, all would be able to walk. Jesus certainly began fulfilling these prophecies and working miracles from the beginning of his ministry. We’ve explored now for a while the miracles of Christ the healer. The physical healing such as that experienced by the man with the withered hand. Christ also offered healing to those struggling with mental health concerns, such as the man in the land of the Gerasenes who was cast out of his community and engaged in self harm. We recalled the story of the Samaritan woman, and the ways her spirit was healed as her dignity was restored. Last week we entered into the story of Peter, and the ways Jesus helped him to reframe his story so that it could be used for the Glory of God. In so doing, Jesus Christ healed his memories as He can heal ours today.

Scripture tells us that as Jesus wandered through the land, he was met again and again by great crowds. The crowd called out to him for healing. Over and over and over. People with leprosy, skin conditions, women who were bleeding, the deaf, the blind, the paralyzed. They sought him out in droves. They begged him to heal their loved ones, the living and the dead alike. Over and over and over. How exhausting! As Jesus wandered through the land he must have felt as though the was in an unending game of whack-a-mole. Could this be it? Was he to spend his live offering healing to these unending masses? Person after person? Then each time he healed one person, he was approached by the cry of two more! It is clear that this work tired even Jesus because again and again he withdraws from the crowds to be in prayer and to re-charge before returning again to work.

As he wandered through the countryside it must have become increasingly clear that there was something truly amiss. The people didn’t just happen to be suffering, there was actually a root cause to this pain. And so, Jesus made he’s way to Jerusalem, the capital, and the religious, political, and economic center. When Jesus entered, he entered on this mission of healing. The people knew it. As Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem, the people cried out: “Save us, Save us Lord Jesus”, but in Jerusalem Jesus did something different. He didn’t simply heal a few people and move on. He could have, but his ultimate mission wasn’t to heal unending lines of individuals. Jesus entered Jerusalem intent on healing all the people, and to do the was to confront the powers of sin and death. Jesus saw the need to change the corrupt systems which caused pain to the people
The cries and cheers of the people didn’t just happen to change from “Save Us” to “Crucify Him”. You see friends, Jesus couldn’t keep his mouth shut. He confronted the religious authority, and the political authority. He called them out. This is why the authorities turned on him. Jesus entered a city dedicated to the worship and glory of God. Jesus entered a city meant to embody the Kingdom of God, and found corruption. And so, he over turned tables and foretold the destruction of the temple. Here in Matthew 23, we see Jesus calling out the religious leaders who were exploiting the poor in the name of God. Jesus is angry. Jesus cries out over and over, “Woe to you!” “Woe to you snakes” “Woe to you hypocrites” “Woe to you, you brood of vipers”. This isn’t polite. This isn’t how you make friends. Jesus is not mincing words. He is angry and he names all of they ways the leaders are actively hurting the people of God, and doing so horrifyingly enough, in the very name of God. Jesus is angry because he knows the consequences of the policies of the leaders. Jesus has seen and touched the pain they are causing. By the time Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was tired of simply healing and desired instead to dismantle the systems that were causing the pain to his people.

He is angry. This is that anger that starts at the souls of his feet and bubbles up, as he accuses the Scribes, and the Pharasees and as he names their faults he only gets angrier. The anger rises further and further until it hits his heart. As this burning anger hits the heart of Christ, it is almost too much to bare, and his heart simply breaks.

Some Bibles have subheadings. Not all have them because they are not original to the text, but they can be helpful when you’re skimming through and trying to find your place. When I open my Bible to Matthew 23:37-39, the subtitle reads “Jesus Laments Over Jerusalem”. Jesus laments. Now this word lament isn’t typically used in day to day conversation….or at least I don't use it in my conversation too much. This word, this concept of lament it is deeply rooted in the Biblical tradition. We find lament in the psalms, in Job and then there is even a whole book of the Bible entitled “Lamentations”. Lament is a cry too deep for words, a cry of pain, and anger. Lament is often a response to deep injustice, to sickness, to death. The people of Israel cried in lament as they were over run by armies, and sent into exile. Rachel cried in lament for her children and could not be comforted. Jesus cried over Jerusalem. As the anger rose in Christ, it shattered his heart and he cried in lament over Jerusalem.

Jesus cried for what God had intended for the city and for the people. God desperately wanted to gather together the people as a hen gathers her chicks. God sought to offer the people warmth protection and love. God wanted to hold the people close in a loving embrace. But the people would not have it. As God sent to the people teachers and preachers and prophets they were repeatedly rejected. God had been clear about his kingdom. God had been clear about his desires. God sent Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea…and on and on, but the people had not heard the call. The city continued to hurt those they were called to protect. The city continued to turn from God. So God came to them. Like the vineyard owner who sent messengers to the workers; but the workers rejected, beat, and killed the messengers until finally the vineyard owner sent his son, thinking they would see and accept the authority of the son, but they killed him as well. So too did the people crucify Christ.

But now, you see, God is clever. God is tricky. God had so desired to gather together the people like a mother hen gathers her chick, but the people were unwilling. The people rejected the Word. The people would not be gathered. The people would not accept the healing. The people would not turn from their ways. That was their choice. We can ask Jonah what happens when we run from God’s deepest desires for us. God finds a way, God pushes on, God forms a new plan.
After Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension Jesus commissioned the disciples and they spread out. The disciples did not remain under the warmth of the wing, they went out. They spread the word. Because the people would not be gathered, God spread the disciples across the world. They went to Rome, Corinth, and Antioch. The apostle Phillip went north to Samaria. Acts 8 tells us that like Jesus, Phillip offered healing. Phillip cast out demons. Phillip preached to the people. Then get this, Acts 8:8 tells us that “There was great rejoicing in the city”. Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, but that lamentation was turned to action as the disciples went to the ends of he earth. The people of Jerusalem would not be gathered to God so He went to Rome, Corinth and Antioch. God went to Samaria, Ephesus, and Tarsus. God went to Thessalonica, Paphos, and Caesarea. In all of of those places, the word was proclaimed. The people were healed, they were gathered. Under the wing of God they felt the love, the warmth, the forgiveness of the Lord. And then, there was great rejoicing in the cities! And as for Jerusalem…well no worries. Because we know that one day, when Christ returns in final victory, the New Jerusalem will descend dressed like a bride, shining and beautiful. There will be no sin, and God will be worshiped and glorified. Surely, there will be great rejoicing in the city.

Friends, this is what God is about! This is the activity of the Spirit! This is the mission of the church! This is why we do what we do. We are called yes, to reach individuals, but we are also called to change more than individual lives. We are called to the city, to the people, we are called to proclaim the coming kingdom to the cosmic order. So that there may be rejoicing in the city, and in all of creation.

This is the mission of the Church and the United Methodist Church. Even before we were United, when we were just a people called Methodist, we proclaimed that God had raised us up for a very particular mission. The mission of the first methodists was to ‘spread social holiness and reform the church and the land’. Today, the mission of United Methodist Church is to ‘make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world’, our mission here at this church is ‘to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of Peoria and the World’. So we make disciples of Jesus, but for a very particular purpose, we do this to change the world. We seek to help individuals, to offer hope, healing and forgiveness. But we are also called to confront they systems that cause hurt, and pain. We are called to confront and dismantle broken and sinful systems. So that yes, people will find healing but also so that there will be great rejoicing in the city.