

3.16.2022 Midweek

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Denise Levertov, "To Live in the Mercy of God"; Luke 13:31-35

"The Mercy of God"

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

The theme for this evening's meditation is about God's mercy for this world, and our response to God by daring to live with mercy for others.

The poem that I read a moment ago by the American poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997), describes our often all too common perspective upon God's mercy; we often view God's mercy with a sense of awe that can also seem inflexible. This is what Levertov means when she writes that "to live in the mercy of God, that complete sentence has "no give." I think what Levertov is describing is the way we can often look at God's mercy as "almighty and eternal" - mercy that is always at a distance, something we long for, yet often forget that we need to embody and act upon for others for it to exist in the world.

Levertov's poem is titled, "To live in the mercy of God," and describes how we must take the risk of faith not only to rely upon God's mercy, but "to dare" to respond to God's grace by living with mercy for others. What Levertov is encouraging us to understand is that mercy is not an abstract theological concept, but rather, a living response to human need. We are not simply to stand back waiting for God to act with mercy, but rather, we are move past a sense of awe about God by daring to be merciful for others.

Levertov is encouraging us to see that it is precisely God's mercy that enables us to act, to give, and to leap with faith, so that we might soar, gliding on the wind and breath of the Holy Spirit. Levertov writes that we think of God's mercy as so adequate, so all encompassing, that it "has no give" – which I think means that we have often failed to see that "to live in the mercy of God" means that *we must give*. We must give of ourselves so that God's mercy can become a visible sign of comfort to those who suffer in this world.

The hardest part of following Jesus in this world is to dare to embody his mercy, by serving alongside him. It is only in daring to deny ourselves and follow Jesus that we realize that we are already soaring, gliding on the wings of the Holy Spirit, not by our own power, but by the mysterious grace of God alive in us. Levertov writes that God will hold and support us, but we must dare to act. Levertov's poem reminds me of Soren Kierkegaard's book, *Fear and Trembling*, and his words about

a “leap of faith.” Only by taking the risk of faith do we dare to leap toward the infinite mercy and love of God.

In other words, mercy, like the word “love,” requires us to do something, to act. Our lament for the world’s needs must also cause us to act – “to dare to care” for others who are suffering. To be in Christ means that we must dare to act with Christ in the world.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus spoke words of lament over Jerusalem, saying “*the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.*” In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus spoke words of lament for Jerusalem twice, in today’s reading, and again in chapter 19 when Jesus also wept over Jerusalem. Luke very clearly shows us Jesus identifying with human suffering by weeping over Jerusalem and all the cities of the world where people continue to experience persecution, oppression and killing.

As Jesus was driven out of Jerusalem and crucified, Jesus continues to lament over every place where human community is broken by rejection and oppression, strife and war. As Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, Jesus continues to lament over the cities of Ukraine and every place where human beings are treated without mercy.

Yet Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem was not abstract; Jesus dared to act decisively by living and dying with mercy and love for this world, for its cities and its human communities that continue to experience merciless attacks by evil in this world.

As Jesus told King Herod that he is alive working with mercy and love today and tomorrow, Jesus continues to speak truth to power, even today. Denise Levertov’s poem encourages us to see that for mercy to be any kind of comfort to the world, we must dare to act with mercy. We must dare to care about the world as God cares about the world.

There is a painting on the back of tonight’s bulletin by Enrique Simonet titled, “He Wept Over It” that depicts Luke’s gospel, chapters 13 and 19 when Jesus lamented the suffering that surrounds human community. Jesus’ lament and tears over Jerusalem teaches us that he came to show mercy to all the cities and communities of the world that continue to suffer under the assault of evil upon humanity.

In the gospel reading for today, 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!*” Jesus is describing the active mercy of God that seeks to surround human beings, not with bombs and killing, but by surrounding them with mercy and love.

To follow Jesus means daring to care about the children of the world who are constantly scattered by evil and oppression. To dare to live in the mercy of God will always mean that we must dare to care about others. We are not bystanders to God's mercy, but we are called to live with mercy for those who suffer in our own cities and for those who suffer in cities far away. For Jesus, there is no physical separation between local and global, of the here of "us" and the there of "them." For Jesus, all cities and all human communities are the places where God's children live and also suffer.

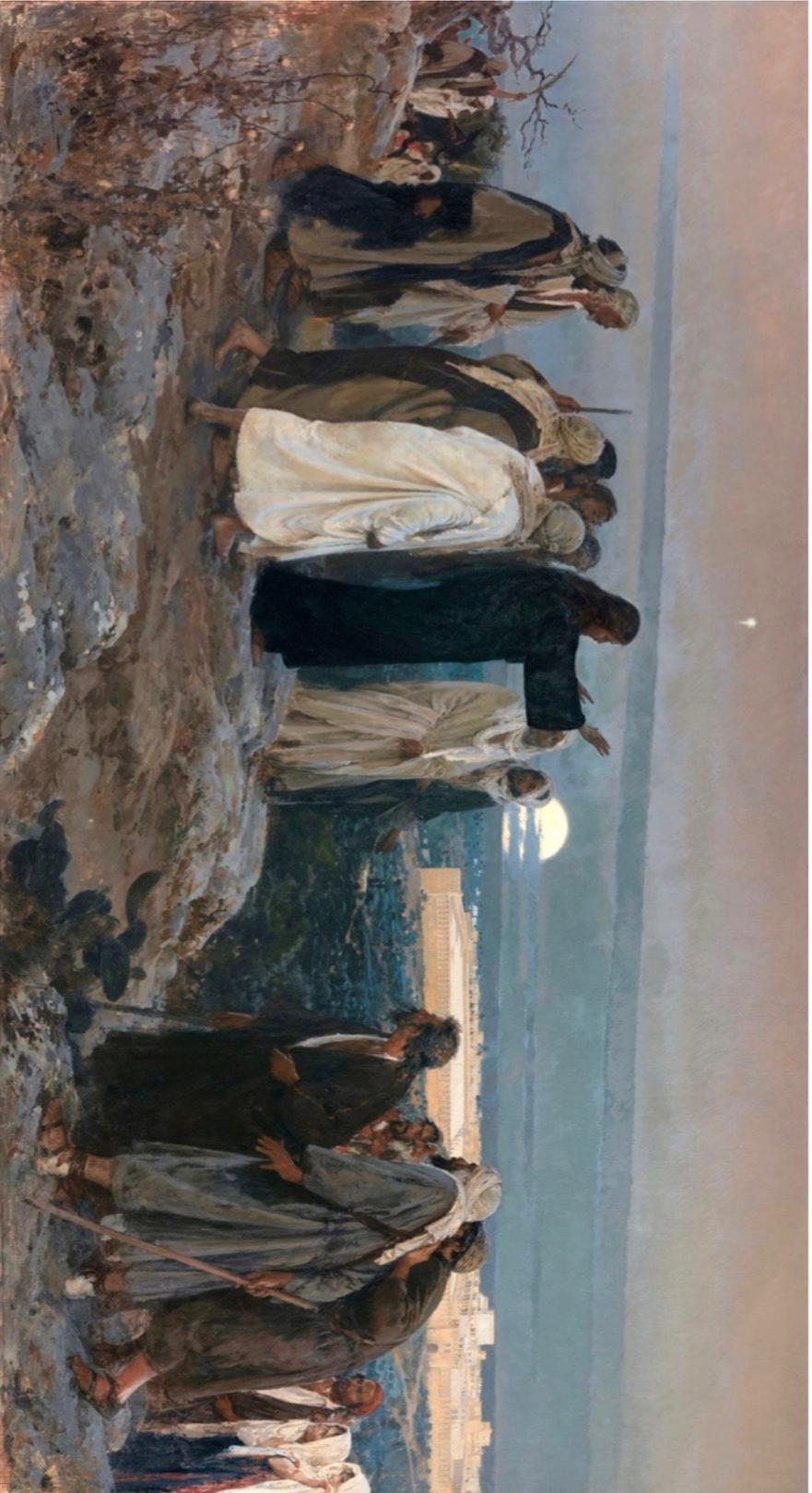
Jesus dared to live and to die for others. This Lent, dare to care for others near and far; lament with tears and resist evil in all its forms in this world.

This Lent, in the midst of an ongoing pandemic that the world urges us to forget about; this Lent, in the midst of sisters and brothers who suffer the brutality of war, dare to care about your neighbor, near and far. Live in the mercy of God.

Daily lament, pray, and act alongside Jesus with mercy,  
so that others will say,

*"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."*

Dare to live in the mercy of God. Dare to care for others. Amen.



Enrique Simonet Lombardo (1866-1927)

"Flevit super illam" (He Wept over it), 1892, Prado Museum, Madrid.