



March 4, 2007

Luke 13:31-35

“We, who won’t be gathered”

Once upon a time, in a land very far away, a long time ago, there lived three young women who were sisters. They dwelt at the edge of a forest, a few miles from the nearest village. They made their living from the few sheep they were able to raise, shearing the wool, carding and spinning and dyeing, to sell the lots in the nearby villages and towns. In this way they led a simple, yet healthy life, and they were able to care for their frail aged mother as well.

Crista, Anya and Ella, for these were their names, lived in peace for several years. None had yet married, though each wondered and dreamed of the future, of beginning a new life with a loving partner, raising children, and making a home of her own.

One warm, dreamy summer’s day, Crista returned from the market with her basket empty, stepping into the kitchen of the modest house where her sisters were preparing the noon meal. Looking up from what she was stirring, Anya glanced at Crista, then paused and looked again.

Crista was pale and trembling. Anya asked, “Is something wrong?” Crista took off her cloak, sat at the table, and turned to her sisters and her mother, who was seated in a sunny corner of the room. Crista told how she had seen soldiers in the village. That they represented the monarch of the neighboring land. That they were stern and giving orders, commanding the residents to pack up their belongings and begin a march. They would be resettled and given work to do. Those who asked questions were told to be silent. Those who objected had been clubbed and beaten. Those who fought back had been run through with swords. The town was filled with hushed and terrified people, leading children by the hand, pulling carts and driving animals with the soldiers at their heels.

Anya's and Ella's faces drained of color and they sat in stunned silence. Their mother wept quietly in her corner. Crista stood and said, "Hurry! We must gather what we need and run deep into the forest to hide. I will carry Mother on my back, if you will bring a few of our belongings."

But it was too late. As the sisters crept out of the house, they heard galloping hooves on the road. The soldiers swept into view, their leader angrily barking orders. Crista tried to shield her mother, but a stocky soldier wrested her away. "This one is too old to march," he growled, and the woman was killed with a thrust of his blade. Ella's anguished and angry cries were silenced with the crack of a whip. Terrified and sobbing, the sisters were driven into the streaming masses of humanity to begin the long march to the resettlement camp.

Long days and nights later, the surviving group arrived in the barren and bleak camp. Their life was ordered by the camp soldiers. Their work was wresting rock from stone quarries with primitive tools and their bare hands. Their food was thin broth twice a day, with a weekly chunk of bread. Their sleep was on hard earth with no shelter from the elements. Weeks passed. Months that seemed like years wore them down. Crista noted the weakness of her sisters and began to give them her weekly bread share. She told them stories of their childhood and sang them songs of hope and courage. Still, they all three grew weaker and were wracked with illness and pains they had no names for.

One day Crista spoke to Anya and Ella of escape. Eyes wide with terror they hushed her. "NO one can escape," they said. "You know that all who have tried have been caught and killed." Crista grasped each tightly by a hand and looked deeply into their eyes, one by one. "But if the soldiers were distracted, we could slip away very quickly."

"There are never any distractions here," Ella said, "only the same deadening routine."

"One day there may be," Crista said softly, "You must be on your guard and ready. Promise me you will try to slip away if you have an opportunity." Bewildered, but sensing their sister's urgency, Ella and Anya agreed.

Strangely, early that very next morning, before dawn, the two sisters awoke to the sound of loud cries and screams and running feet. Anya and Ella looked quickly for Crista, but she was nowhere to be seen. "We have to run!" Anya whispered. "But without Crista? How can we?" was Ella's desperate plea. "We have to. We promised." And Anya jerked her sister by the arm. Scurrying in the semi-darkness

they climbed the hills behind the quarry, following the route into the deepest brush which they had already eyed with longing in earlier hushed conversations of possible escape.

As they reached the crest of the hill, they heard in the thin air a voice, a familiar voice, raised in song. Peering through the brush they could look down on the camp, that was full of clanging and cries and movement—but not enough to drown out the song. Anya and Ella saw Crista. She had climbed high onto the roof of the head soldiers' residence. She was singing in a loud clear voiced, one of the songs of courage and hope they had all learned as children. She had gathered a few leaves from the edges of the barren camp; her skirt was full of them. She was throwing them into the air and smiling. As Anya and Ella watched, they saw the head of the camp reach the roof and then a whole group of soldiers swarmed around him. They surrounded Crista, and the sisters could not see her anymore. The singing stopped. Only the barking of the soldiers and the cries of the people remained in the air.

“We have to go on,” Anya said. She roughly pulled her sister forward. Blinded by tears and stumbling, they continued through the days and nights that followed, coming at last to a safe haven in a neutral land where they were received compassionately. Months again passed, and the sisters grew strong again, and well, at least in body.

Ella and Anya both remembered their sister and their time in the resettlement camp. Ella remembered the cold. She worked hard at her trade so that she would not have to be cold again. She remembered the hunger, and feasted and ate as much as she could, whenever, she could, vowing she would never taste hunger again. She remembered her sister's sacrifice, and how she was killed by the soldiers----- and Ella never really trusted anyone completely again--- she had seen what beasts humans could be.

Anya also remembered the cold, and she remembered her sisters sleeping close beside her to keep her warm on the bare ground. She noticed when children had too little covering and spoke up, turning to those around saying, “What can we do to warm them?” Anya remembered the hunger and the mercy of her sister in sharing her bread. Anya looked for ways to be sure no one went hungry. Anya remembered the resettlement camp and she remembered Crista. And she knew that no matter what would ever happen again in her life, there would be beauty in the midst of ugliness, and she'd know that evil could never really stamp out good. And forever she treasured the knowledge that she was loved. Loved so much her sister had chosen to die for her. The preciousness of each brother and sister of all humankind was something Anya tried to show others.

Once upon a time, in a land very away, a long time ago, there lived a brother of ours. He was one who loved us. He showed us mercy. God came to us through him, and reached out in love and forgiveness, longing to gather us near. This man, our brother Jesus, gave up his life for us, to save us, to redeem us, to buy us back from that which would devour and enslave us.

He did this, a long time ago. But we still so often draw back and refuse to be gathered. We don't seem to see we've been redeemed. We, who won't be gathered, live as though we ourselves are responsible for who we become. We, who won't be gathered, believe we must be like Ella and first look out for ourselves and for our own. We, who won't be gathered, keep thinking that's what life is all about: this is a dangerous and cruel world, we must fill our own bellies and look out for our interests. We even do this with our salvation: We, who won't be gathered, are careful to follow the right practices of the right churches or spiritual movements, so we can prove we really are saved--- taking care of ourselves spiritually as well as physically.

We keep living as though God has not redeemed us. We keep living as though our personal determination, and even desperation, is necessary to keep ourselves from harm. We are filled with bitterness about the evil of the world, rather than awe and joy at the good that still shines through it.

God continues to reach out for us. To gather us, as a hen gathers her brood under her wing. God is not telling us to recklessly have no concern or love for ourselves. ON the contrary, God has shown us how precious we are, how much it matters that we be cared for. God came in Jesus and gave up his life for us all. And we are called to live like people who've been redeemed!

Remember the message of Lent: We do not repent in order to receive God's mercy; we repent because we have ALREADY received God's mercy. Our lives need to show that we know this.

Can you hear Jesus' voice: "I died for you. Treasure the knowledge that you are loved. Loved so much your brother died for you. You have been redeemed. How will you live now?"

Friends, God reaches out in love, mercy and compassion. How long will we refuse to be gathered under God's merciful wing? When will our lives be those of God's redeemed and beloved people? How will we live—as the first sister or the second? My friends, repent. Turn from ways of death and despair. Turn, for God has granted you mercy. Amen.