

LAMENT AT 36,000 FEET

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Luke 13: 31 – 35

(Second Sunday in Lent)

February 28, 2010

There was a sadness in her face which I noticed as I settled into my seat next to her on the plane to Minneapolis. She was in the window seat but didn't look out. She just stared at the seatback in front of her. When the cabin attendant with the beverage cart asked her what she wanted, she shook her head.

Then, a couple hours into the flight she turned to me and asked, "Is it snowing in Minneapolis?"

"Yes," I answered, "but the worst of it won't be until tonight."

"Do you live in Minneapolis?" she then asked.

"Used to. But now I'm going to visit my father. You?"

"Oh, I'm going to help my daughter's family move," she said. Then added, "My son-in-law was laid off and now their house is in foreclosure."

"I'm sorry," I said. "This is a hard trip for you."

"They thought they were doing everything right," she added. "I helped with the mortgage as long as I could. But they've fallen too far behind. And now my grandchildren will have to leave their friends and school. It doesn't seem fair," she lamented at 36,000 feet.

I thought of her last week when I first read the text – Jesus' lament for Jerusalem, a city that had lost its way politically, economically, spiritually.

Ironically, the book I was reading on that flight was by Jim Wallis, editor of the Christian social justice magazine, "Sojourners." In the book entitled, "Rediscovering Values," Jim Wallis argues that the not-yet-over economic crisis around us is really a crisis of spiritual values. And that if the only question we ask is, "When will this Great Recession end?" we will be asking the wrong question.

For underneath the economics of it – the failures of those big banks and the mortgage market, the bail out and stimulus money, the Wall Street bonuses, even as unemployment remains at almost 10% and everyday 6,000 American families continue to lose their homes to foreclosure – that underneath it all, Wallis argues is a values crisis. That we are where we are now because we lost our moral and spiritual compass. So the right question to ask is, "How will this all change us?"

So, let's think about that question. Has the economic crisis of the last three years changed us? – individually, collectively. The stock market is coming back into recovery mode and that's a good thing for sure. But what have we learned? Maybe we're a little more conservative now in our investments. But is anything else different?

Lent is the season to be intentional and very reflective about our lives. Can we draw some Lenten spiritual lessons from the not-yet-over economic crisis?

Certainly, the state of the economy has large structural, even global dimensions that can only be addressed at the macroeconomic policy level. But government fiscal policy can only fix part of what got us into this mess. Don't we as individuals also have to be honest about and confess and repent of the parts we too played?

I mean, we all liked it when our stock portfolios and retirement accounts were booking double digit gains. Even though there were economic prophets who warned that it was all a bubble created by too much spending and speculation and not enough saving and investment in real infrastructure. But who wanted to listen then?

What about now? Can we think deeper than just blaming Wall Street executives and their bonuses? Is this still a large teachable moment? Can we relearn some healthier habits of the heart? Have we reconnected money matters with prayer and community and spiritual values?

You know, the symptoms of breakdown started long before the banking, mortgage, and credit meltdown. For years studies documented how Americans were becoming more materialistic, narcissistic, and unhappier. The frothy prosperity had a high price: stress, anxiety, family and marital breakdown, frantic, out-of-control work and lifestyles. As consumption and credit card balances went up, so did the rates of depression, addiction, domestic violence, and disintegration of community.

The common good became less and less common. Business became only about making lots of money. Short-term profit taking ruled the day. Wealth was accumulated without conscience. The drum beat of the culture was, "You deserve more now."

And somehow "greed" stopped becoming a dirty word. How did that happen?

Even the church jumped in with the big audience megachurch and television preachers touting the prosperity gospel; "If you get right with Jesus, you will be rewarded with anything your heart desires. Jesus wants you to have it all."

Yet, as this out-of-control, greed driven economy was generating paper wealth, inflated home values, obscene executive bonuses, record credit card debt, and even higher levels of oil consumption...the poor became poorer.

The numbers of people below the poverty line, the number of hungry children, the number of families without health insurance, the number of homeless, also increased disproportionately.

As the haves...had more...the have-nots...had even less....

Then the bubble burst. Millions of Americans found themselves "underwater" on their sub-prime mortgages, and defaulting on credit card payments, even as the economy was shedding jobs by the millions.

And so on an airplane a woman quietly weeps for her grandchildren who are loosing their home, even as on a Second Sunday in Lent, Jesus laments a city and people who have lost their moral compass.

Jesus didn't know anything about the stock market and investment banking, hedge funds, credit default swaps, or bundled mortgage speculation. But he did understand how people get seduced into lifestyles contrary to religious traditions of simplicity and generosity, social justice and stewardship of the earth.

Jesus did understand what happens when a culture promotes greed and extreme individualism at the expense of the common good and responsibility to future generations.

Jesus understood and warned that when our economic lives and our spirituality become disconnected, we will loose our way.

So, has this not-yet-over economic crisis changed us in any way spiritually?

For instance, have we redefined for ourselves a basic level of personal satisfaction that is not based on more is better?

Have we relearned to distinguish true needs from media-induced wants? Can we recognize it now, when we're attempting to compensate for our insecurities with more stuff?

Have we made simpler living a religious practice?

Because the earth cannot sustain another 20 years of consumption as if there's not tomorrow. That's not just economics. That's a deeply spiritual perspective as well.

Oh, we can blame Wall Street and the "too big to fail" investment houses, Congress and politics for the current mess. And there is no doubt that special interest and greed for too long have trumped social responsibility and the common good.

But it's Lent and in Lent we get beyond blame, and we each take a careful look in the mirror and ask some deeply spiritual questions.

Have we been seduced into lifestyles that are too expensive, not healthy, not sustainable, and not spiritual?

Are we really doing what's best for our families?

Do we know how much is enough? What are we teaching our children about money and things, stewardship, generosity, and the common good?

Have we turned a blind eye to the economic disparities that create crushing poverty for the have-nots and spiritual poverty for those who have too much?

Have we put more trust in our investments than in our prayers?

Will we continue to push the real cost onto our children's children?

Jim Wallis writes about the Native American tradition of asking how a decision will affect people and the land for the next seven generations. Can we develop a 7th generation mindset?

Can we afford to not have this economic upheaval change us for good?

As we waited to get off the plane, she said to me, "I didn't mean to dump my worries about my family on you."

"It's okay," I said. "I'll hold you in my prayers."

"Oh, thank you," she said. "I told my daughter that if we keep praying and trying to follow Jesus, some good will come out of this."

And I think about her, and about Jesus moving toward Jerusalem, and what she said on that airplane has the ring of truth for all of us: "That if we keep praying and trying to follow Jesus, some good will come out of this."