

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem” / Palm Sunday 2012

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” Jesus cries, on that first Palm Sunday, as his ridiculous donkey parade comes into view of the holy city. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone the ones who’ve been sent to you. How often I’ve wanted to gather you under my wings, like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you were unwilling. If you—even you!—had recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

Let’s be honest—it’s not just Jerusalem of old that fails to recognize the things that make for peace. The Son of Man might weep if he took a donkey ride into modern Jerusalem, too. Or Tehran. The two cities rattling their swords at each other across the Jordanian desert. Well might Jesus weep over Pyongyang and Seoul, just as perhaps he has wept—or is weeping—over Washington, DC. On that first Palm Sunday, when Jesus paraded on the donkey’s back toward his own appalling death, he paused to weep for the mortality of our world, our war-going nations, our crumbling cities. And though he cries at the sight of Jerusalem, he was weeping too for all human communities whose fates were sealed: for Dresden, and for Coventry, and for My Lai. The name he utters is “Jerusalem,” but his prophet’s heart soars over the centuries to include Warsaw and Trochenbrod, all the forgotten villages of the Belgian plains, now known as Flanders’ fields—annihilated in mustard gas and in mud. He weeps over all the places of injustice and horror here in our own land, where we can no longer claim that our “alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears.” He weeps over Gnadenhutten, Ohio (where the ‘praying Indians’ were massacred), and Tuskegee, and Birmingham, and Selma. As he marches toward his own death, he pauses to shed a tear for all your many deaths and for mine. He grieves over all the squalid tenements of West Philadelphia, all the crack houses on the North Side of Pittsburgh, all the mobile home meth labs in Beaver County. He weeps for all of us earthborn mortals who fail to recognize the things that make for peace, and who pay the price most dearly. And what of the innocents like him who also pay? Who weeps for them?

Listen. Listen, and you might hear him cry today, “New York, New York, you who refuse your park benches to the homeless and gamble for sport with the pensions of the elderly.” “Harrisburg, Harrisburg, you who rob your citizens of public transportation and clean water but make your lobbyists even richer.” “Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh! Mount Lebanon, Mount Lebanon! How often I have wanted to gather you under my wings, like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you were unwilling. Can you—even you—recognize on this day the things that make for peace?” Amen.