

The Daughters of Jerusalem
Delivered outside Old Cambridge Baptist Church
Good Friday Stations of the City, April 13, 2001
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(Luke 23:27-31 NRSV)

²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

“For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Robert Frost says,

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.¹

There is something compelling in this for me, I suppose in part because as once a country boy, I, too, was a swinger of birches. Young birches, those limber and elastic of trees, which one can climb carefully to the top, and then jump, flinging one's feet out horizontally while holding the top, and ride the supple pole in a gentle arc of not quite free-fall. There is an ease and a light-heartedness in being a swinger of birches.

Oddly enough, on this Good Friday when Jesus says that he is green wood, it calls to my mind the ease and lightheartedness of his ministry: Jesus who ate with whom he wanted, Jesus who healed with mud and a good word, Jesus who scared his disciples to death walking on water, Jesus who fed thousands with but a few morsels and laughed at their disbelief of abundance, Jesus who waved away the rigid prescriptions of the recognized leaders. Green, supple, engaging, alive and life-giving wood was Jesus. A swinger of birches he might have been.

It's a funny thing how the grace of goodness threatens so many. And so, the green wood was nailed to dry wood and set on a hill to die, and it broke the hearts of those women who followed him, the daughters of Jerusalem.

And on this day the green wood gave them pause, not comfort. “For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” he said.

What happens when the green birch becomes the boards and lintels, pews and communion tables, and even the polished cross of the church? What happens when we tame the light-hearted birch into a solid piece of furniture? In an inescapable irony, Jesus pointed, perhaps, to a time in which the high regard with which he would be held would make dry wood

¹Robert Frost, “Birches,” first published in *Mountain Interval* (New York: Henry Holt, 1916)

out of him who had been the green wood, and take away his lightness of heart and replace it with hardness of heart in his name.

On this day, he who was the green wood on which did swing so much human hope and possibility, he who was the green wood asks, where have you have made me rigid and brittle? And where will you will weep for what you have made of me?

He says, O daughters of Jerusalem, weep even more for me in the days when they adore me, for their misunderstanding may be even greater then. The prayer is, then, to cherish the green wood and not the dry wood, for the green wood is alive and resilient, and it invites us to swing all hope and possibility upon it. Amen.