

## Luke 13: 1 - 9    03.20.22

Two incidents from the time of Jesus - one is the brutal murder of a party of Galileans on a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem, as Catholics will go to Rome and Muslims to Mecca. Chaucer based his "Canterbury Tales" on the practice of pilgrims traveling together to religious places. This heinous act was at the direct order of Pontius Pilate. Some present in the crowd around Jesus reported the shocking event. It was the talk of the town. The other incident is the death of 18 citizens of Jerusalem when a tower suddenly collapsed in the vicinity of the pool of Siloam, a pool cut into the bedrock outside the ancient walls of the oldest section of the city, dug in the 8th century by King Hezekiah, and used for ritual purification as well as a source of healing. In John's Gospel, Jesus directs a blind man to enter the pool and wash away the mud made from spitting on the ground, and receive his sight. Two terrible moments in the life of the city. Intentional cruelty, and random violence. Both events lead us to ask why?

Jesus anticipates the thoughts on the minds of the crowd. They wondered how such a grisly murder could take place at the threshold of the temple, where the Holy of Holies was sheltered and it was believed Yahweh was "present". Where was God when the swords and spears pierced the bodies of innocent believers? There may have been a tinge of racism in the speculation of the crowd. These were, after all, Galileans, people of mixed Jewish and Gentile blood, so maybe they got what they deserved? Local prejudice was real back then as it is today. I remember when I was young that people in Pittsburgh assumed folks if West Virginia were . . . different. Hillbillies. It was an unquestioned assumption back then, which I wonder about today. What was possibly wrong with people from West Virginia? Well, nothing really. Nothing at all. So did Pontius Pilate have those pilgrims killed because they came from an area, Galilee, filled with extremist followers of a fellow named Judas (of Galilee) who refused to pay tribute, the taxes of occupation, to Rome? There is no written evidence of Pilate's motives, but history does record Pilate resorted to horrific brutality as governor. We don't know why Pilate had them killed in anger, their human blood mixed with the blood of the sacrificial lambs offered in worship. We don't know today, but the crowd around Jesus wants to know, "How deep was their sin that God should punish them so severely?"

Jesus was terse and emphatic in his response to the Jerusalem crowd. The murdered Galileans were no greater sinners than any other Galilean, nor any deeper in sin than the 18 who died in the collapse of the tower. We are not to equate tragedies with divine punishment. Atrocities are not handed out according to a divine schedule of sinfulness. Atrocities happen. Tragedy occurs. God does hold us accountable, but God does not hold some people more accountable than others, so repent of your own sin before it is too late, says Jesus. How does the prophet Isaiah put it? "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned - every one of us - to our own way; (and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isa 53: 6).

There is an urgency in the parable that follows. The fig tree is barren; it has been years without the tree bearing any fruit. One day, as unannounced as a spear thrust by Roman soldiers into the body of a pilgrim, as unexpected as the sudden collapse of a tower, the owner of the vineyard arrives looking for fruit and finding none, orders that the tree should be held accountable, that the tree be cut down and perish. But the vinedresser, a common laborer, asks for more time for the barren tree to receive special attention so that it might become fruit bearing. But if not, then it will perish. It is as if Jesus looks into the eyes of the crowd and repeats for them the message of John the Baptizer who preached, "Bear fruits in keeping with

repentance” (Lk 3: 8) and “Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Lk 3: 9).

The types of events in the Gospel this morning - state-sponsored brutality and stunning catastrophe, can rock our world. We hear of the senseless loss of life, or learn of the disaster, and our perspective can shift. Our complacency is shaken. The normalcy of our ordinary lives feels more perilous. To the crowd looking to understand the tragic deaths of the Galileans, Jesus says, “Don’t look at others for their defects, look to yourselves and repent.” To those struck with the fragility of human existence, to be extinguished in a few seconds of falling tower stone, Jesus says, “Look to yourselves, for time is short and no one is assured of tomorrow.” Jesus called out to the crowd and calls to us today to tend to our own lives while there is time.

Repentance is always in season, but the season of Lent gives repentance a special priority. I know that I invited you to enter into a Lenten discipline with me, and with those of us who worshiped here on Ash Wednesday. Perhaps you did. Perhaps you didn’t. But observing a Lenten discipline is not repenting; a Lenten discipline is to remind us of our human frailty and the need to repent. To change your mind, to adopt a more loving attitude, to be more patient, even meek, when dealing the mechanisms of the church, to practice forgiveness as the social glue between family members at home, or team members at the university or office, to allow the peace of Christ to rule your heart, that cauldron of desires and deceit and divisiveness - now that is what I understand to be repentance, and I understand it because it’s personal. To paraphrase Paul, The very thing that I want to do, I do not, and the very thing that I do not want to do, that I do. (Ro 7:15).

Sometimes it seems that repentance is like trying to force yourself not to think of not thinking. If I say to you, “Don’t think of a red rose”, I imagine you will struggle not to think of not thinking of a red rose! So we are to take comfort that there is someone helping us tend the fig tree that is our life. That laborer. That vinedresser. That gardener is digging around the roots and preparing the fig tree to bear fruit. Remember with me that in John’s Gospel, on Easter morning, the Risen Christ first appears to Mary Magdalene in Gethsemane as a gardener. The power of the resurrection is at work in the world preparing us at the deep levels of life to become better human beings than we are. This resurrection power is present by grace; we can’t force Jesus to make us better people, can we, because love cannot be forced. But the love of God doesn’t need to be forced. God so desires us to grow ourselves in faith, in hope, and in love that God sent Jesus the Christ that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

When you discover that your life is changing, that there are feelings stirring within you, challenging prejudices and beliefs that are unkind, then you know the gardener is cultivating your humanity with his loving attention. We can cooperate with these changes, giving in to the moment when compassion replaces hesitancy in our interaction, meet someone this morning you don’t know well, when our hearts respond in hope and generosity to the atrocities and tragedies of the world through the OGHS. Let the gardener cultivate what is best in you today.

Isaiah said, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned - every one of us - to our own way: and the verse continues “and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isa. 53:6). At the end of Luke’s Gospel, Pilate will execute another atrocity, mixing the blood of the crucified Jesus with the blood of sacrificial Passover lambs. But, from that death will flow resurrection power. Amen.