

Reflection for Sunday, March 20, 2022

Lent 3: *"You are Worthy"*

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

(Psalm 63:1-4)

Welcome and Peace ...

Lent is traditionally a time when we take stock of our lives. It offers us the opportunity to attend to things which we often fail to notice and to look at things from a different perspective. Today's Gospel passage, with its enigmatic references and its brief parable, is usually seen as a call to repentance and change in our lives.

I really appreciate how the Gospels are not simple chronological records of Jesus' actions and words but carefully crafted pieces of writing. Their authors deliberately and skillfully bring together various stories in ways that reveal particular insights about Jesus and God's Kingdom.

Today's passage can be broken into two parts – an encounter between Jesus and some followers (v.1–5) and a parable (v.6–9). The two parts work together – not just in the way they focus the attention of Jesus' hearers on a particular issue, but also in the way he exposes and challenges some underlying assumptions which are shaping their thinking.

Today's passage starts when "some of those present" tell Jesus of a gruesome atrocity involving Pilate and some Galileans. The Galileans were executed during a ritual practice. Jeremy Williams (a professor at Brite Divinity School) reminds us how such an event could have personally affected Jesus. He was from Galilee, this violence impacted from the area he grew up in – people he could have known, his friends and neighbours. And then we have Pilate, a direct appointee of the Roman empire who had a track record for being violent. Pilate embodies the brutality that Roman subjects experienced daily. And we have a preview of the role he will eventually play in Jesus' death.

Jesus' response broadens our perspective from a specific incident into a much more fundamental, foundational issue. Instead of giving an opinion on this particular instance, he

uses it – in conjunction with an example of a ‘natural’ disaster, the fall of the tower of Siloam which killed eighteen people– to expose an underlying assumption the speakers may be carrying. This assumption connected suffering directly with sin. As humans we look for meaning, we wonder if there is a reason for our suffering. There is an assumption that we live in a universe of rewards and punishments, the phrase “just desserts” comes to mind. Those of you in Rev. Bill’s bible study on the book of Job will remember how Job’s friends reacted, they thought that he must have done something wrong to deserve his suffering (Job 4:7). The question of the justice of God (theodicy) persists even today. I have been at the bedside of more than one cancer patient who asked, “why me?” as if it was something they had done or not done that had put them in that bed. Part of us knows that’s not true that bad things happen, but we ask the universe anyway.

Jesus seizes on these two calamities—one an instance of state-sanctioned terror, one a random accident. Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no clear apparent reason. Both kinds of events lead the rest of us to realize how precarious our existence is. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong, nothing that caused their demise. He characterizes life as just as unpredictable as we know it to be.

Although these events might allow Jesus an opportunity to defend God against charges of mismanaging the universe, he does not go that route. Jesus only implies that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not make atrocities come. They just come.

Life’s fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims, and “why?” questions to address those of us who thus far have survived the hazards of the universe and human society. We should not mistake our good fortune as evidence of God’s special blessing.

Jesus wants to talk about repentance. The Greek word translated as “repentance” here is *metanoia*, from *meta*, “change,” and *noia*, “mind” — so, *meta* + *noia* = “change of mind.” In the ancient Near East, many considered the “mind” to be the essence or center of the human person; today, we might say, “change of heart.”

I have been taking a weekly course through the region’s Indigenous Ministries, called the Wisdom of the Elders. Last week in discussion, we were talking about harmony. Maybe because I had this passage from Luke floating around in my head and was thinking about repentance, it seemed to me that it was a beautiful way of describing repentance. Knowing deep down that you are out of harmony with God, with your neighbour, with creation and intentionally changing your heart/mind, to being in harmony with how God hopes that you will be in the world. I have sorted it out in my mind completely yet, but something about it feels right.

I wonder what repentance means to you.

The need for repentance, to change our mind/heart, to align ourselves with God’s kingdom, is a universal condition. Luke emphasizes the suddenness with which this death comes. Just as Pilate’s victims and the people crushed by the tower did not enjoy the luxury of choosing the time of their demise, likewise the unrepentant will suddenly find they have delayed too long

and lost themselves. If life's fragility demands urgency, that urgency shows that life itself has carved out opportunity for us to seize God's graciousness, as the following parable suggests.

Jesus' short parable about a fig tree speaks of imminent judgement. (Another word I shy away from).

The parable reinforces ideas from the first half of this passage, they vibrate against one another (as Rev Bill says). A cultivated yet unproductive tree may continue to live even without bearing fruit, only because it has been granted additional time to do what it is supposed to do. Unless it begins to bear fruit, the result will be its just and swift destruction.

Like Jesus' earlier words in response to the recent tragedies, the parable warns against false reassurance. Just because you have not been cut down, do not presume that you are bearing fruit.

The tone of the parable emphasizes that patience and mercy temporarily keep judgment at bay. The role of the gardener offers a crucial characterization of this patience and mercy. The tree has not been left to its own devices. Everything possible is being done to get it to act as it should. Correspondingly, God does not leave people to their own resources but encourages their repentance.

The parable's power comes through the suspense it generates. Will fruit emerge in time to thwart the ax? How will this season of second chances play itself out? How do the gardener's efforts make the tree's existence a state of grace and opportunity?

In this passage the *need* for repentance is assumed and so it takes a backseat in emphasis to the *urgency* of Jesus' call. Tragedy and hardship have their ways of nudging people toward God, but these verses suggest that tragedy and hardship come so suddenly that they often mark the end, not the beginning, of our opportunities to live lives inclined toward God.

Jesus' words about judgment and repentance can be scary. Sometimes life is so overwhelming, and it feels like judgement is coming at you from all directions, you do not need it from God too. However, this passage also depicts human life as a gift, albeit a fragile one. Repentance can arc towards joy. And it shows of a God of mercy and compassion, one that gives extra time and care.

The parables of Jesus are an invitational and interactive way of stimulating engagement and drawing out questions which can then lead on to critical reflection on our ways of being and doing. They are illustrations, provocations, pictures, glimpses meant to poke and push us forward, to wake us up, and to challenge us to live out the fruitful, generous lives God created us to live.

Jesus is urging his listeners to take an active, practical part in our redemptive transformation. Why? Because the paths we are on — the barren, bloody paths of Pilate, the rich fool, the sluggish servant, the defensive litigant — lead in the direction of death and destruction, and

Jesus calls us to reorient ourselves (with the Spirit's help!) toward life and restoration. For Jesus, that is what "repentance" is all about. *Get off the paths of death — and come to life!*

We can hear this story as urgent exhortation (*Get busy! Bear fruit!*), and we can also hear it as good news (*The gardener has compassionately arranged for an additional year — it is not too late! There's still time!*). All of which brings us back to Luke's overarching emphasis on divine mercy and the universal, God's-love-will-not-be-denied vision of redemption.

Sources:

www.sanctifiedart.org

<https://www.saltproject.org>

www.workingpreacher.org

<https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/>

Feasting on the Word commentary

The abolition of deserving

"Cut this tree down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

"Let it alone until I dig around it and put manure on it."

—from Luke 13.7, 8

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Because things happen.

God is not an algorithm.

Did the eighteen people crushed by the wall
deserve their death? No.

Does the struggling tree deserve to be cut down? No.

Jesus dispenses with the idea—
the demonic lie—of deserving.

There is no such thing.

God is not bound to the past
and our performance in it;

God is in the present moment.

God is not a cashier,
dispensing what we've earned.

God is life, and the giving of life, and nothing else.

No compromise. No conditions.

There is no "deserving."

It is the lie of Satan, luring you into the past,
into fear, into bondage. It does not give life.

God's will is not what you deserve,
but what you need.

Regardless of the accidents that befall you,

regardless of evil you do or the evil you suffer,
God's will is to offer what you need to live fruitfully,
which is always mercy.
A tree that is not fruitful needs nourishing.
A person who is not righteous needs healing.
A son who has distanced himself needs family.
People who crucify need forgiveness.
A Beloved who has died needs resurrecting.
Dare to abandon your calculations
and its illusion of control.
From Life there is only the giving of life.
Receive, and you will have fruits to give.

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