

Sermon for March 6, 2016 – “No Easy Answers”

4th Sunday in Lent, Year C – Texts: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Turn on the television news, check the Internet, or pick up a newspaper any given week and you'll find a report on some catastrophe, some tragedy, that has occurred somewhere. Only the locations change. There are the natural disasters; things like hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis. Then, of course, there's all the man-made stuff; things like school shootings, church shootings, acts of terrorism, war, etc., etc. All of this randomly wreaking havoc and forever changing people's lives. And right behind them, often left unreported, are the larger, but somehow less visible and dramatic, tragedies; like the sixteen (or so) thousand children under the age of five in the world who died this past Wednesday of hunger. Roughly the same number of children who die on any given day, to the tune of nearly 5.9 million children under age five died in 2015, according to the World Health Organization. In every one of those deaths someone grieved. Families or loved ones grieved...Every single one. And on some level, every one of those grieving people probably asked the same question: “Why?” It just doesn't seem fair. What had any of those folks done to deserve such tragic deaths?

In Jesus' day, there was no question about fairness. The assumption was that disease, suffering, and death bore a direct correlation with human sinfulness. The thinking was, the greater the sin the more likely something bad would happen to you. It started with Adam and Eve. Paul himself wrote to the Romans that the wages of sin is death and to some degree, like it or not, agree with it or not, we still think this way. “Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong,” says one pastor. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs...sometimes beating ourselves up in the process. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect. We do so in the hope we can change what we're doing and stop whatever has gone (or is going) wrong. “What this tells us is that we're less interested in truth than in consequences,” this author goes on to say. “What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives.”

It was no different in Jesus' time. People longed to understand and control misfortune. So the crowds asked Jesus about the Galileans executed by Pilate. They wondered about those who were killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed. What had those people done to deserve their fate? Might those tragedies have been prevented? Jesus knows what they are thinking and we say this because, at first, he seems somewhat less than pastoral in his response: He asked them **“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”** He doesn't seem to want to argue over the popular equation of sin and death. What he seems to want to emphasize is that death is always close and not necessarily controllable or explicable. Death happens, Jesus says – and it does. It can happen when you're praying. It can happen when you're standing under a wall. It can catch you by surprise. And though you might intend to repent of sin at the end of your life, who or what's to say you'll have the time to do so?

Jesus sounds less compassionate than we might expect him to be. But, as Rick Warren (and others) have stated – God is less concerned with our comfort than with our character. Here, Jesus certainly isn't aiming to comfort the crowd, He wants to challenge them. Jesus touches the panic they have inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them. They're terrified by those things, and for good reason.

They've searched their hearts for any bait that might bring disaster sniffing their way. They've lain awake at night making lists of their mistakes. But Jesus doesn't honor the illusion they have that they can protect themselves in this way. No, what he does is honor the vulnerability that their fear and anxiety has opened up in them. It's not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It's not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark, not if it makes them turn toward the light. It's that **turning** Jesus wants for them – that repentance. Which is why he tweaks their fear, by telling them, twice, that “**unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.**” Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, Jesus tells them. Terrible things happen, but you're not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you're doing. The hole that your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you're there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it's not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is, in fact, the kind that leads to **life**.

To make that point, Jesus tells a parable, though it's not exactly a warm and fuzzy one. In fact, it's a parable that underscores God's judgment and the need for repentance. He tells the story of a fig tree that's not producing and how the landowner has grown impatient with its inability to bear fruit. He proposes cutting the tree down. But the gardener argues for a one-year reprieve. Let me work with the tree for one more year, he asks, and then, if it doesn't produce fruit, we can cut it down. This is a parable of God's justice in conversation with God's mercy. One commentator wrote that “the parable of the fig tree invites us to consider the gift of another year of life as an act of God's mercy. John the Baptist declared that the ax lay at the root, poised to strike any tree that didn't bear fruit would be cut down. In Jesus' parable, however, the gardener pleads for, and is granted, one more year. Indeed, the year of which Isaiah wrote and that Jesus proclaimed, ‘the year of the Lord's favor’ would be a year of forgiveness, restoration, and second chances. But let's cut to the chase here, shall we? Jesus is the gardener, right? He refuses to give up on those who are living in the vineyard. Now, maybe the vineyard is the whole earth, all of creation. Maybe it's the church. Maybe it's our lives, yours and mine. But the point here is that Jesus isn't giving up on any of us, you, me, the church, the world, or **any** part of creation. So, there's **hope** in this parable – don't cut the tree down. But there's also **urgency** – give me one more year. Could **this** be the year? We can hear that as a threat, that there's not much time left. Indeed, some evangelists press people with the question, “Where will you be if you die tonight?” But Jesus' parable moves more in the direction of promise than threat: “I'm going to do everything I can to help this tree live and bear fruit... “I'm going to find every way possible to get to hearts that are hard as packed down soil.” How about that?

So while we're speculating about why certain people died at Pilate's hands, or why the others were killed by the falling tower, Jesus, the gardener, is working on our **hearts**. Yes, those stories were real. They were as real as any tragedy we can name. Such realities remind us that our time is finite. That we (as we heard on Ash Wednesday) are dust, and to dust we will return. Bible stories like these tug at our hearts. They nag at us with the truth that we can't keep putting everything off until tomorrow. But being scared to death can rob us of all hope. Life can then seem utterly arbitrary, random. It may cause us to say, like the author of proverbs that “all is vapor.” “What's the use? If I die, I die. “There's nothing I can do about it, so why bother, why even try? Into the midst of such despair, the gardener comes. Don't cut the tree down...

Let it alone for one more year.

Jesus – the **master** gardener – wants us to live.

His passion is marked for us by great urgency – don't wait!

Let's look at our life and dare to ask the hard questions: Are we stingy in our love for others? Are we withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Are we so busy making a living that we've forgotten to live? Jesus digs at us with questions like these. But these are the questions, like those asked by the parable of the fig tree, that move us toward repentance. Could this be the year for such turning?

I think that's the question we should be asking about ourselves. Is this the year for us to bear fruit? Is this the year? But, far too often, we're not. All we can think about when we hear of tragedy is what happened, and why, and more often than not, how things can be so unfair. Such questions are common but ultimately they have a way of distracting us from **the** question. The important question. It's not how or why bad things can happen to good people (like us), No. The Lenten question, shaped by the cross of Christ, is "How do we stand before God?" And there's no easy answer to that question. Many folks have come to believe that any difficulty, any struggle, is wrong and unjust. We want to believe that no one should have to suffer. We want to believe that you can somehow go through life without it feeling unfair or unjust. Why is that? Well, it seems to me that somewhere along the line we stopped placing our trust in a God whose presence makes things like tragedy and suffering somehow bearable and difficult, unanswered questions easier to live with. Our difficulty is that we don't want **God...We want answers!** And many of us will go wherever we can find **easy** ones.

"Why?" we ask... "Why did this happen to them? "Why did this happen to me?" Probably for no good reason.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus reminds us that the Father "**causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**" And in John's gospel (chapter 9) is the story, you might recall, of the man who was born blind. His disciples asked him, "**Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**" "**Neither this man nor his parents sinned,**" answered Jesus, "**But this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me."** Bad and good things happen all the time to good and bad people alike. The notion, argues one scholar, that only bad things happen only to bad people, was put to rest when Jesus was nailed to the cross.

Our task is to ask ourselves the more crucial question: In **all** times and places, in all circumstances, in all things, in joy **and** pain, can we trust God to be God? Can we love God without linking such love to the good or bad things that come our way in life? Are we able to do the works of He who calls us?

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing. There are no easy answers to life's tough questions. The Church is **not** built, unfortunately, on easy answers. Would that it was. I'm not sure that there are **any** easy answers. Instead, the Church is built upon a singular recognition that in the presence of the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, we get something unique. We get a God whose love both **challenges** and **enables** us to live **without** all the answers. We get a God who's willing to dig around our hearts, a God who is patiently encouraging us toward repentance and faithfulness and fruitfulness. We get a God who's given his whole life to us and for us so that we might come to learn how to give our lives to him more fully. That we might have life and have it abundantly. Beyond what's fair, that seems to be a pretty good deal to me.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.