

Sermon
Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9

Sometimes the scripture readings are just hard. Period. Hard to hear, hard to understand, hard to respond to, hard to preach on! Where is the good news here? Where's grace? It seems very absent here. There's sin, death and repentance here – and that's a heavy load! And believe it or not there is grace. It's at the same time boldly present and also tucked into a hard to reach place.

Imagine -

It was a hot and dusty afternoon in Jerusalem. Folks were just milling about, finished with their morning business and now just catching up on the news and gossip with their cronies. It seemed that bad stuff just kept happening, how do we make sense of all this? We know about that. Jesus is in the crowd and someone said, "Let's see what this radical young rabbi named Jesus has to say. Hey, Jesus, those Galilean Jews who were at the temple in Jerusalem, the ones, who Pilate had killed and then mixed their blood with his own sacrifices, they sure got what they had coming. Ha, we know those hillbillies from Galilee aren't as right in their faith as we here in Jerusalem. They probably just had it coming." Someone else piped up, "You know, what goes around, comes around." And yet another shuffled his feet and wrung his hands saying, "Well, you know, everything happens for a reason." Jesus had heard enough, "Were they worse than the rest of the Galilean Jews? NO! And, Jesus

himself adds, “What about the eighteen people killed when the tower fell on them, did they deserve that?” NO!

A sharp and strong NO! Is the first part of Jesus’ response to the people gathered around speculating the deserved fates of their neighbours.

Dave Ewart, author of HolyTextures blog writes, “There was a widespread, taken for granted, deeply held, bedrock belief that EVERYTHING happened for a reason. God is just, and if bad things happen to someone, it has to be because—in some way—they deserve it. Or—in some way—something good will come from it and it only seems like a bad thing to us.”

In both cases, Jesus would have shocked his listeners, who were pretty sure that everything happens for a reason and that what goes around comes around. They also would have been exceedingly familiar with the bloodthirsty glee of folks who love to think that people deserve what they get. No matter how many times Jesus preaches that God doesn’t act that way, people don’t believe it. God is in the mercy business, not the retribution business.

It is that deeply held reward and punishment way of thinking and believing. We, too, are challenged to think or believe differently. And Jesus, a Galilean himself responds, but he will not be coerced or tricked into the we/they, good/bad, shame/blame game and the question of ‘why’ has no place here. It is not significant. Again... Jesus is in the mercy business, not the retribution business.

So, first thing Jesus said to the folks around him. “Stop with the judging, blaming and shaming people for their suffering and death.” The condemning sin is not found in the ones who have misfortune fall on them. The sin is found in those who think that the sin is found in those who have misfortune fall on them.

Secondly he says to them, “Stop, take a look at yourselves. Repent!”

Sometimes, God, like he did with Job turns our eyes, our focus to God. Sometimes, like he did with Jonah, God turns our eyes towards others; go to the people of Nineveh. And at other times, like in our passage today, God turns our attention inward, upon ourselves.

Repent! Jesus must have cried! It’s not an “Oh, sorry, I’ll try not to do that again” request. It’s a full on cry to change in their fundamental thinking. They need to change their mind about their current commitments to injustice and unrighteousness. This is a change so deep that it leads to a change in the way they act and live. In the Greek language of Luke’s gospel the word for repentance is *metanoeo*. In Hebrew the word is *shuv* the core meaning of which is “to return” or “to go back” or even “to go home.” Jesus is telling them. “You are God’s people, God has provided for you in every way; God is merciful and calls you to live mercifully. Look within, change your thinking change your ways, God has made you, called you and given you gifts and abilities to share. Return to where you came from.”

Repentance will not remove suffering or death. We’ll all die, that’s a fact. Life is fragile. But living free of judgement, blame and shame makes room for the

gifts that God has created within us to flourish. Make your lives meaningful while you have life! Repentance empowers us to live fully as God intends us to live, not locked in the grips of judgement and blame, whether we are the ones judging and blaming or judged and blamed.

Then Jesus gives them a parable, just in case they still don't get it. He tells them about a bum fig tree that doesn't bear figs. They've heard versions of this story before, maybe even the versions from Mark or Matthew where Jesus curses the fig tree. In Luke's story the owner wants to cut the tree down, but the gardener intercedes and does everything he can to guarantee that the tree will produce. Again Dave Ewart explains:

“In effect, Jesus is saying: I've just dumped a lot of manure on you, and I'm giving you a year before I come back to see if you are bearing good fruit or not. So pay attention to what I've just taught you. Absorb it. Take it in. And let me activate in you what you are already designed for. You don't have to become completely different—become a whole new tree. Just bear the fruit that you already have been created for.”

Repent, repent! See how incredible, God's mercy is! Be that mercy where there is pain, suffering, guilt and blame. We are witnesses of that mercy in the broken and corrupt world.

After all, God has created a world of grace, which is different from a predictable world, a world where “what goes around comes around” or where “everything happens for a reason”. Living in God's grace is not the same as having things set, safe, and sedate. God's world, at least the world God is trying to get us to see, is much more unpredictable. The child whom society has

written off may be the most loving. The poor who have nothing to give may be the most generous. The garden that is the slowest to grow may yield the best harvest. It is so much fun to have that which is predestined be grace, more grace, and always grace. Grace, it's at the same time both boldly present, God gave us God's promise and it's also tucked into a sometimes hard to reach place, our hearts.

Amen