

Lent 3C

March 7, 2010

St. Andrew's

Exodus 3.1-15

Ps 63.1-8

1 Corinthians 10.1-13

Luke 13.1-9

I was on a bus recently and looked up to the advertising above the windows. It's what you finally do when you're bored on a bus... A particular ad caught my eye: "Has the Ministry taken your child? Contact Dewey, Cheetham, and Howe; we are experts in returning your child to you. Call this number." It took me by surprise! My first thought was, Gee, maybe I'd better send that phone number to my mother; she may think the ministry has taken her child! Then I realized that I was in Canada and the Ministry (capital M) they were talking about was the Canadian version of Child Protective Services and DSHS in Washington state. Phew!

It was an interesting example of language and how we can so quickly think we understand when in fact we have misunderstood. It happens all the time when two people think they are talking about the same thing and can't understand what on earth the other is saying until they figure it out the disconnect.

Jesus is working to straighten out the understanding of some followers who thought that the tragedy which befell the Galileans while they were making their sacrifices and the 18 people who were killed when a tower fell on them must have had it coming. Surely they were worse sinners than everyone else and God was punishing them. Leslie Hoppe writes that suffering as a punishment for sin is a biblical commonplace. Hebrew theology asserted that obedience to the Torah brought blessings, but disobedience brought a curse. Those still living suggested to Jesus that in the moral calculus of the cosmos, the dead deserved to die, muses Dan Clendenin. Perhaps at some subconscious level they also thought that avoiding disaster signified God's approval of their lives.

Here, Jesus clearly rejects that view. A person's righteousness or lack of it has nothing to do with any evil that may befall that person. And that might be a tough pill to swallow because it's a very human tendency to think that we get what we deserve; at least the bad people do. Or should. Michael Curry has written that if God was in the business of meting out judgment and curses in relation to our sins, there probably would not be anyone left on the planet. In this text, continues Curry, Jesus says no to simplistic answers to deep and complex questions, no to attempts to solve deep troubles with quick fixes, and no to shallow theological thinking.

But we do it all the time, when difficulties befall us and we raise our voices and fears and eyes to heaven and ask, "Why? Why is this happening to me? What did I ever do to deserve this?" Curry reminds us of a phrase used in jest when some minor misfortune befalls someone: "You ain't been living right..." said with a smile. But when things literally fall apart for someone, when we cry out

from despair or experience unbearable loss, the age-old logic of “You ain’t been living right” sneaks into our consciousness.

Years back, in my former life as a physical therapist, one of my patients was walking on the treadmill and we were visiting. She had been out of work for months due to a back injury. Money was a problem, her self-esteem was shot, and she had been doing everything that her doctors and therapists recommended with no ease of her pain. Out of the blue she began sobbing and couldn’t continue to exercise. She stepped off the treadmill and crumbled into a chair, unable to speak through the tears. When she finally settled enough, with her head in her hands, she said that she was certain God had sent her this debilitating back pain as punishment for not baptizing her children.

I don’t remember what my words of response to her were at the time. Probably some kind of weak platitude, saying that I didn’t believe God worked that way but knowing nonetheless that I have had similar thoughts at times. We may claim to know better, but when disaster strikes, we wonder what we might have done wrong. The sense that God metes out judgment as we go is a strong one for us. Also an easy one; a way out for things we cannot explain. A self-righteous proclamation from people like Pat Robertson who think Haiti or New Orleans got what they deserved for the sins of their present and past.

Jesus says no; that is not the way God works. And he goes on to tell us how God does work in this parable of the fig tree. The kids in Godly Play know that parables are not all that they seem; you have to knock on them and see what they have to say when they open because it’s not always what you think. And every time we go into a parable, we may understand something new.

It’s no surprise that during Lent we might find a parable about judgment. Not for those who hadn’t baptized their children. But judgment for those who failed to repent. Many of the commentators read this parable as an allegory, where everything is assigned to someone: God is the landowner, Israel the tree, Jesus the gardener, etc. Try not to go there. Use the parable to meet you where you are in your life of bearing fruit as a disciple, the barrenness and even rejection of the gospel that we experience in ourselves, and what it is like to hear God say to you: “I’m not giving up on this tree. Give this tree another chance. Work around its roots, give it some fertilizer, keep it well watered, and see if it won’t bear fruit.”

This is a parable of judgment. That will come. Paul makes that clear in his letter to the Corinthians. But it is also a parable of God’s never-failing mercy. It is a parable of hope. In that, it should move us to repentance. What happened to the Galileans at Pilate’s hand and those caught under the tower may not have been due to their sins, but because it was sudden and unexpected, as tragedies often are, it’s a reminder to do our work of repentance, of returning to the Lord, of turning back to Jesus while we are able. Life is precarious, uncertain and short. It’s a serious mistake to put off repentance.

It is the ongoing work of our lives and it is particularly the work of Lent. The truth of it is that our time is finite. Barbara Lundblad writes that Jesus digs around our roots, loosens the hardness of our hearts, opens our ears to the cries of the needy around us. Every time we repent by turning ourselves back to God, every time we ask for forgiveness, every time we start anew once again, we

are given another chance. God's judgment is tempered with divine mercy and the promise made to Moses that "I will be with you."

Repentance is a major theme for Luke who uses the word more than all the other gospels combined. John the Baptist had said that the ax was laying at the root, ready to strike and any tree that didn't bear fruit would be cut down. But Jesus says no, that's not how God works. Repent, loosen the soil, feed it with prayer and giving and service and generosity and tolerance, aerate it with the Holy Spirit. Don't misunderstand this: The repentance that Lent calls us to can feel like a scary place and we might have our own fears about entering. But Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that it is a holy space we are called to enter. It is the holy ground upon which Moses stood in the presence of the great I AM. It may be difficult to stay there and hurt us to see our own truth, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

Gail Wheatley+