

March 20, 2022
3rd Lent, Year C
Exodus 3: 1-15
Psalm 63: 1-8
Luke 13: 1-9

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 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."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We want our world to make sense. And despite understanding that our world is complex and that life does not always make sense; well, we might understand in our minds, but our hearts ache, our hearts yearn for an orderly world, one that makes sense.

The attacks on Ukraine by Russia, and the stories of the deep suffering ordinary folks are experiencing shakes our sense of an orderly world, and remind us of the vulnerability of being human.

Watching the evening news this week, I saw a story of an older Ukrainian woman who had left a shelter for just a few minutes, to clean off a blanket, to shake it out. An explosion nearby injured her and she told the reporter she

had her foot amputated because of her injuries. She started to cry saying: “I had a home, I had a job, I had a life, and now, I can’t walk and I have nothing.”

Our hearts are wrenched by this and so many more stories of suffering and loss. What can we do?

As soon as the war began, I read of stores removing Russian vodka from their shelves and bars pouring out Russian vodka, and energetic boycotts of Russian goods spreading quickly. I cheered at the television! Something we can do!

The Associated Press had an article this week that began:

“They’re pouring out vodka, boycotting Russian restaurants and even leaving threatening voicemail messages at Russian businesses. Angered by the deadly violence and the humanitarian crisis resulting from Russia’s war on Ukraine, some Americans are taking it out on Russian businesses and brands in the US—or anything that sounds Russian.” (AP, Friday, March 18 2022)

The story went on to tell of business owners in Manhattan who have been harassed.

One restaurant, owned by a man and his mother, advertised as an Eastern European and Russian eatery. However, this family is from Ukraine and still has relatives there.

The owner explained that they have gotten emails “using expletives about Russia, and telling them to ‘go back home.’”

We want the world to make sense, and anger is an energizing, empowering feeling, and gives us the illusion of control, of things making sense. An illusion of control that only hurts others, deepens our habit of anger, and spreads hate.

And in case we think these are modern problems and failings, we come to our gospel reading today.

Jesus is teaching when some in the crowd speak of the recent deaths of a group of Galileans, people from Jesus’s home region. These people were attacked by Pilate’s troops just as they were offering their sacrifices in the Temple.

They were killed, but then the soldiers took the Galileans’ blood and purposefully allowed their blood to mingle with the blood of the animals they

had come to offer to God. This was a grotesque and deliberate assault on the people and their faith.

The reading does not explain why the people told Jesus of these horrific killings; but Jesus asks them a question that might offer a clue:

“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”

Jesus is asking those who came, what do you believe about those who were killed by Pilate’s troops and then their bodies assaulted further? Do you believe that they were worse sinners than others, than you? Did this happen to them because they were bad people? Is that how you are making sense of this horror?

Jesus’s question points to the accepted belief in that time that all suffering and illness and misfortune had roots in one’s own behavior, one’s own choices, one’s own sins.

This accepted belief in the time of Jesus still creeps in on us in 2022, a belief that can sneak up on us when we urgently want the world to make sense, when we want the horrors of the world to stay away from us.

The crowd is silent and Jesus’ question “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” awaits an answer.

Finally, Jesus answers his own question with an adamant “no”. Jesus then refocuses the people, and us, from this hurtful way we try to make sense of the world.

Jesus simply says:

“But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Jesus then goes on to tell the crowd another story, another horrifying story of eighteen people who died purely by chance, being just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus tells them of a recent incident, in which a tower in the wall around Jerusalem fell without warning, crushing eighteen people and killing them.

And Jesus follows his story with the same painfully focusing question:

“.....were they worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem?”

And then the same re-directing:

“No, I tell you but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Repent, repent from our useless pursuit of an orderly world, a world that makes sense, repent from our attempts at order that lead us to demonize others, to say “go back home”, repent from blaming others for their tragedies.

Repent, repent, not a threat but an invitation from our savior and brother Jesus, to change our minds, to turn again, to return our minds to him, to let go of our fearful search for sense, and join our brother in the path of love, of sacrificial love.

Finally, Jesus tells the crowd a parable about a fig tree, a fig tree that needed a bit more time, like all of us, who might be old in years, but are still in our youth as Christians.

The owner of a vineyard has a fig tree and has given it three years to produce fruit. No fruit has appeared, and the owner is sick of waiting and ready to give up on it, saying: “Cut it down!” that the fig-less tree is just wasting space.

But the gardener advocates for the fig tree and tells the owner to give it one more year, and that he, the gardener will tend it a bit more, nurture it, aerate the ground around it so it can accept watering more easily, and even add some manure to feed it.

Evidently waiting three years for figs is showing enormous patience and kindness to a fig tree.

Three years for a fig tree, is perhaps like our merciful God, our merciful gardener, waiting a lifetime for us to repent, to change our fearful ways, and turn again to God’s way of love, the deep and sacrificial love seen in Jesus. Can we focus not on the dogged and useless task of pursuing order in our lives, and instead to give our days, our hearts, our lives to knowing ever more deeply and then sharing that patient, merciful , nurturing love?
Amen.