

Lent III

Cycle C, 3.24.19

Exodus 3:1-8,13-15/

1Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12/Luke 13:1-9

WHY ARE WE SPARED?

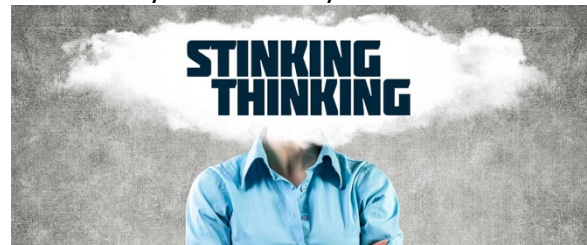
I've always found this gospel difficult to understand; it has such a negative and foreboding tone – these two tragedies. One is an act of violence – the massacre of people at worship in the temple; the other a random disaster – the collapse of a tower that was being built in the town of Siloam – eighteen people were killed. Then, it hit me, this isn't an ancient story. These things happen every day in our world, just as they did in Jesus' time. A few weeks ago people at prayer, -- fifty Muslims worshipping in two mosques in New Zealand, were brutally slain by a crazed killer. A tragic act of violence. And a few weeks ago, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 took off from Addis Ababa. Six minutes after takeoff, the plane crashed killing all 157 people aboard. A random disaster.



The same questions rise in our hearts, and upon our lips today, just as they did two thousand years ago: "Why did those people suffer such tragedy?" Is there some explanation for the horrible actions of a cruel tyrant like Pilate or an apparent random suffering? If so, this world would seem a much safer place, wouldn't it? I mean, if there is some explanation why those people

suffered such tragedy, and why we did not, we could hear the news and read the paper with a little less anxiety, without having to worry if we might be tomorrow's headline.

Our gospel lesson today deals with just this issue. I call it "stinkin' thinkin'" – the inner dialogue that goes on all the time, but is based on false premises or misguided understanding and harsh judgement of ourselves or others. We're all guilty of it at various times. A student gets a low grade on one test and her inner thoughts might immediately tell her: *Boy, are you stupid.* A relative or friend is in the hospital and you mean to visit him, but you get a flat tire or your child needs your attention and you can't get to the hospital, but you chide yourself all day – for something that you couldn't control. That's "stinkin' thinkin'." Correcting "stinkin' thinkin'" allows us to live more freely and honestly.



I believe that much of Jesus' teaching in the gospel is intended to correct it. In today's gospel Jesus was approached by people who told him of a massacre in the Temple. And everyone in Israel was choking on the question mark, "Why?" How could God allow a tyrant like Pilate to exist in the first place, much less in a position of authority over Israel? Jesus refers to the collapse of a tower – a random act of suffering, and people wonder "Why?" Needless to say, these are hard, hard questions. Any of us who suffer, and all who live in a world of suffering like this, are wondering what Jesus will say. Listen to his surprising answer.

First, Jesus says clearly and emphatically, that there's no necessary correlation between disaster and deserving. Bad things do not just happen to bad people. Jesus could hear the theological wheels turning in the heads of those who heard about the massacre in the Temple and other tragedies. He knew that at times like these, when confronted with such incomprehensible suffering, we're prone to assume that the random violence was not so random after all, but rather the discerning hand of God's justice, seeking out and punishing those with secret sins. But Jesus, with great tenderness, says *"No, these Galileans were not worse sinners than the others who were in the Temple that same day, but whose lives were spared."* And to make the point even further, he grabbed the newspaper out of their hands and flipped over to the story about a tower that fell and killed eighteen residents of Jerusalem. The insurance agency would have called the tragedy "an act of God." But Jesus disagrees. Again, he tells us emphatically that these were not singled out to die because they were worse sinners than those who just missed being crushed by the falling tower. No, Jesus says, such an easy explanation is simply the misguided attempt of those who survive to feel safe in an unsafe world. He points out to them their "stinkin' thinkin'." The harder truth is that unless we all take our lives seriously, unless we all find our true meaning and purpose in life before God, we are all headed to a final reckoning. It's just a matter of time. Bad things happen to good people sometimes. Jesus knew this in a personal way, for even as he spoke, he was on his way to become yet another Galilean Pilate would slay while Jesus prayed.

But since this is true, it leads to a second truth. Jesus says that there is equally no precise correlation between

survival and God's approval. If tragedy is not the hand of God's justice, then blessings and abundance are not necessarily a sign of God's favor. And with this insight, Jesus bids us to spend our energies asking not, "why did such a tragedy happen to them?" but rather "why did it not happen to me? Why am I spared?" And just as we furrow our brows at this question, Jesus tells a parable to illustrate his point.

The story of the unfruitful fig tree and its gardener is unusual for two reasons. First, the gardener's incredible pampering with this flop of a tree. Fig trees, we're told, usually thrive on neglect. They just spring up on the side of a hill, or protrude from under a large rock, and with little or no attention, they bear fruit. But this tree is planted in a garden, and watered regularly, and even given mulch and fertilizer to help it produce. And the second unusual feature of the story is the gardener's incredible patience with the tree. You see, fig trees in Palestine bear figs three times per year, so this tree has already had nine opportunities to yield fruit, even before the master granted it a reprieve of another year of chances.



Like so many of Jesus' parables, the story ends without an ending. Did the fig tree take advantage of this incredible grace of extended chances? Or did it remain stubbornly figless? We don't know. Maybe we each provide our own ending to the story, depending on how we respond to this truth with our own lives. For the sobering

truth Jesus is driving home to each of us is this – the failing of so many of us is not the evil that we do, but the good we fail to do. This fig tree wasn't a bad tree, it wasn't a heretic tree. It didn't do anything. And that was its great failure. Given so much good opportunity, and spared yet even more time, this tree failed to do the one thing for which it was created— to offer a hungry world something to eat. Instead, it simply sat there, soaking up the nutrients of the soil and sun; taking and taking and taking, and never, ever, giving anything back.



Be careful, Jesus says, as we ponder how we will finish his parable. Just being spared is no sign of God's approval for our lives. The fruitless tree would be foolish indeed to brag to other trees in the garden about the gardener's special treatment, claiming that treatment as a sign of the master's favor.

**Even so, our season of Lent just may be
a Master's gracious patience with us
to finally do the right thing,
to fulfill the purpose for which we were
planted in this world in the first place.
If that's true, I don't want to be caught
just doing *nothing*. Do you?**

John Kasper, OSFS

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