



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 24, 2019
EXODUS 3:1-15; PSALM 63:1-8; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13; LUKE 13:1-9

REIMAGINING OUR WORLD

Luke 13:1-9 *[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.'"]*

With the spate of warm weather this past week, Kathy and I found ourselves drawn to yardwork at the deanery, leaning into the warm sunshine like little flowers in our own right.

I was tardy this year in pruning the roses that run along Aloha—delayed by late winter snow and cold, but the roses are surprisingly forgiving, and have already begun sprouting fresh shoots. Pedestrians stop to express

surprise at the deep cutbacks, remembering the abundance of blooms and leafy stems from last year. But I learned long ago that limited pruning of roses almost always leaves them less healthy, and with diminished blooms.

We also moved a small fig tree from the backyard to the side yard, where there is more sun. It is an Olympia fig, a cultivar originating here in central Washington, bred

for our climate, but I've had it for three growing seasons now, and it has languished. It still stands just about three feet high, and has not yet born fruit.

I took my cues from the gospel this morning, and composted it with a good mixture that contained 15% manure, and then mulched its new location, and watered it well. And I said a prayer for the right species of wasp to pay us a visit later this spring, knowing that without his pollinating work, nothing will happen again this year.

I will let you know how it turns out, but I tell you all this now because it was the backdrop for my pondering this gospel text, and about Lent in general. In truth, this passage is a difficult one. Biblical scholars do not agree on its meaning and application. And it is ripe for misunderstanding.

It comes in two parts, and it is helpful to situate these nine verses in the context of a much longer discourse Jesus has with his disciples. The theme throughout is about being ready and holding hope for a new day. There was an air of disillusion among his followers because so much seemed to be going wrong, and so many were suffering because of it. Power struggles, imperial oppression, hunger and homelessness,

senseless violence, and a keen sense that the world was coming to an end. Sound familiar? This is the backdrop for the questions asked of Jesus here—they are questions of theodicy—that is, can we find a reason why bad things happen to good people. And the questions presume that they must not have been good or they would not have died such terrible deaths.

Jesus seems to have little interest in that line of thought, and simply says no, they did not die at the hands of Pilate or under a toppled building because they were more sinful than others. I suspect he would say it again today if he were asked today if those killed by gun violence or a plane crash were somehow more flawed than others.

Maybe that's not your question sitting here, at some distance from such tragedies, but I can tell you that as a priest I have had countless occasions sitting in the hospital rooms or living rooms of people asking why—why did this happen, this disease, this tragedy, this violence. We need to make sense of it, and our minds often go to those dark places where we conjure up a god who causes such suffering and death as punishment for sins. *Quid pro quo*. God foreclosing on the debt.

Only that is not who we know God to be. God is all about forgiveness, not foreclosure; God is about mercy and patient hope for our return, not closing down the farm.

God is not the landowner in this parable of the fig tree, wanting to pluck it up and throw it out for its lack of fruit. God is the gardener who tends to the tree, even willing to get the divine hands down in the soil of our lives, dirty hands working in a measure of hope that we will turn into our true identity and bear the fruit that comes with it.

Now here's the tricky part: the two parts of the passage hinge on Jesus who readily dismisses the question linking tragedy to sin—he says no—but then he says very emphatically to his disciples who are trying to make sense of the broken, hurting world in which they live, that they need to repent or they will suffer a similar fate.

It stops us short, if taken at face value, but Jesus often used hyperbole to make his point, and some scholars suggest that is what he is doing here. “Repent or you will perish just as they did” is not a literal declaration, but an exaggerated plea to frame your life by another ethic.

Repent is a churchy word, loaded with baggage for many of us, but at its core it is about having a change of heart and mind, allowing our desire and imagination to see the world through a different lens than previously known to us. As Jesus is teaching his disciples—including you and me—to turn from a sense of disillusion and despair about the current state of affairs in the world, he invites us to imagine the realm of God, in all its abundance, as the alternative, and orient to it here and now. Doing so will help us frame the rest of our lives, and our deaths, in a different light.

The season of Lent is often called the season of repentance, and the scriptures appointed for our consideration each Sunday in Lent carry the theme of repentance, in one way or another, exhorting us to consider a different tack as we make our way through life.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but Lent is actually about living along a path to abundance. We focus on the Lenten disciplines, we observe a season of self-denial and renunciation, we are reminded of our mortality—we do all this, not as ends unto themselves, but as the pruning work that makes it possible for us to be who we were created to be, and to live in reference to the God of hope and mercy and wondrous love

that overcomes even death so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. It takes imagination to get there, which takes a change of heart and mind, which is the root of repentance that bears much fruit.

What God wants for us all is to leave behind the constrained haunts of fear and scarcity, and turn into the abundance of God's hope for us—for you and me and all creation. And Jesus invites us to envision such a world here and now.¹

¹ Some exegetical themes are drawn from an essay by James Allison published in *The Christian Century*, February 19, 2013.

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-01/sunday-march-3-2013>



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