

Message for March 20, 2022

Lent 3

Luke 13:1-9

Of all of the horrific images from the current war in Ukraine, one of the most haunting is surely that of a very pregnant woman being carried out of a maternity hospital that had just been shelled. Most of her face was covered and only her eyes, which reflected sheer terror, could be seen. Tragically despite all the efforts to save them, both she and her baby died. It was a very disturbing image and it brought home the sheer horror and inhumanity of what is happening. We like to think that we are past wars like this. Didn't we learn anything from the Second World War? Not surprisingly many people are asking the question 'why'; why is this happening?

Now in a sense this is a very easy question to answer. There is a war simply because one person, for reasons known only to himself, wanted one. Sometimes though when people ask the question 'why', they are doing so on a 'deeper' level. What they are really asking isn't so much why it is happening but rather if there is a meaning or a purpose to what is happening. Is this war a part of God's great plan for the world? If not, then where is God in all of this? If God is love, and if God is all powerful, then why doesn't he do something to stop the fighting and suffering? Why didn't he do something to save that woman and her child? Indeed, why do bad things happen anyways? There is of course nothing new in such questions and in fact such questions were even asked of Jesus himself.

One day some people told Jesus about two recent tragedies. In the first, there had been a confrontation between some worshippers and Roman soldiers at the Temple and the result was that a number of people had lost their lives. In the second incident, a tower in Siloam had collapsed. The collapse may have been a construction accident or perhaps it was due to a minor earthquake but whatever the cause, eighteen people had been killed. Jesus' questioners wanted to know why these particular people had died. Had they perhaps been punished for their sins?

Jesus rejected their reasoning altogether saying: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered

this way? I tell you no". Then, right after rejecting the notion that those poor people had been punished for their sins, Jesus went on to say something that was truly shocking: "Unless you too repent, you too will perish" and just to make sure that they got the point, he repeated it.

I have to be honest and admit that these words have always troubled me; they do simply because they sound so harsh and uncaring. As another pastor once said, imagine being called to a hospital by parents who have been told that their child has a life-threatening illness and they wanted to know why this was happening; was it because of something that they had said or done? Were they being punished for their sins? "No" said the minister, "you are not being punished for your sins but unless you repent, you too will perish". What sort of pastoral care would that be? No minister I know would ever say such a thing, so why then did Jesus?

What Jesus was doing, as he so oftentimes did, was change the focus. What Jesus was saying is that there is no real point or value in asking the question 'why' when bad things happen. We don't know why, and we will never know why, at least in this life. When tragedy strikes, Jesus told his listeners, what really matters isn't an answer to the question 'why'. Rather what really matters is the state of our relationship with God. With this in mind, Jesus then moved on to tell them a story.

Jesus said that there was a farmer who planted a fig tree. Everyone back then knew full well that fig trees were supposed to be very fruitful and produce two crops a year. Far from producing two crops a year though, this particular tree hadn't even produced one single fig in three years! Quite understandably the farmer had run out of patience and so he ordered that the tree be cut down; if nothing else, the wood of this useless tree could be used for kindling. His servant though interceded on the tree's behalf. "Give it another year" he urged. "Forgive it" he said, and forgive by the way is the actual word that he used. The servant promised that he would dig around the base of the tree, fertilize it, and do everything else he could to help it bear fruit. Forgive it and give it more time he begged, and while the story doesn't say so, the clear implication is that that is what the farmer did. But what is the point of this parable?

This parable is of course a story about us and our relationship with God. Just as the farmer planted the fig tree and expected it to bear fruit, so too has God in a manner of speaking planted us and expects us to bear fruit. What

fruit? Some would say that we are to bear what St. Paul called the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the qualities that are supposed to characterize us and our lives as God's people and the disciples of Christ. Love and all the rest are supposed to be reflected in how we relate to everyone whether they be members of our families, our friends, the people at church or at work, the staff who serve us in a store and yes, even those annoying people who phone us at dinnertime and want to clean our ducts! But seriously, are our lives always characterized by these qualities? Are we always fruitful?

If we are honest about it then the answer is 'no', we are not always fruitful. In the eyes of God, we are perhaps far too often like the fig tree in today's lesson. Metaphorically speaking, we sometimes deserve to be cut down and thrown into the fire but even so, all is not lost. It isn't because with God there is no point of no return.

Imagine for a moment that a train is barreling down the tracks and then, off in the distance, the engineer sees something lying across the rails. It is so far off that he is not sure what it is but even so, his reaction is almost instinctive; he blares the horn and slams on the brakes. There is the loud screeching sound of metal grating on metal, but will the train be able to stop in time? That all depends on whether or not it has passed what is called the point of no return. The point of no return is an imaginary line or tipping point. Before we reach it, things can be changed and the outcome altered. Once we have passed the point of no return however, it almost seems as if the outcome is carved in stone and nothing can be done to change it.

Now this may be true of many things, but it is most certainly not true when it comes to our relationship with God. It isn't, simply because just as the gardener was there for the fig tree doing his best to make it fruitful, so too is Jesus here for us. Perhaps no one knew this better than St Paul, a man who was very well aware of his shortcomings and failures to live the life and be the person that God had called him to be. Even so, as he said in his letter to the Romans:

"Who would dare to accuse us, whom God has chosen? The judge himself has declared us free from sin. Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us!

I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, neither messenger of Heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!"

This is the good news and promise of the gospel, that while there are times in life when we are less than fruitful, all is not lost. It isn't, because the one who judges us is also the one who died for us, was raised for us, and is even now praying for us! It is never too late to repent and turn life around because with God there is no point of no return unless we decide that there is. We believe in the God of a second chance, a third chance, a fourth chance, and as many other chances as we need or want, and this is the good news and promise of these weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us we pray as we come to you in prayer on this, the first day of spring. We give you thanks for this season of life now upon us as the earliest shoots and flowers emerge from the ground after the cold barrenness of winter. We give you thanks too for the spiritual life that we celebrate at this time of year during these weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter. We praise you and thank you because you are the source of life, both physically and spiritually, in all of its glorious fullness and abundance both now and forevermore. We thank you for everyone and everything that makes our lives so good and full; truly you have blessed us with so much, more than what we really need or deserve. Help us we pray to bless, even as we have been blessed.

We pray this day for all for whom life is not so good and who do not feel so blessed. We pray for those who are ill and those who mourn. We pray for those who are struggling to make ends meet as inflation continues to rise. We pray for those who have no home, and those who wonder if they will ever own a place to call home as house prices continue to rise.

We pray this day for all the victims of violence, and we especially pray for the people of Ukraine; those who are there, and those who have fled and are now refugees with no place to call home. We pray for an end to the war and a just resolution.

We confess that we see what is happening and we wonder how and why this is happening. Indeed we see bad things happen to good people all of the time and sometimes we wonder why life seems to be so unfair. Even as we don't know the answers, help us to put our faith, our trust, and our hope in you, at all times and in all circumstances.

We thank you for the wonderful news and promise of Lent, that you are a God of love, mercy, and forgiveness. We thank you that there is no point of no return with you, and that forgiveness and new beginnings are always ours for the asking. Help us, and your people everywhere, to live as what we are; a redeemed people; redeemed through and by your Son.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen