

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him 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.'"



"Why Do God Things Happen To All People?"

'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.'

Psalm 51:17

In his reflections on this verse, Rev. Richard Floyd wrote: 'The ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us of our mortality; the one prerequisite for resurrection is death, something we will all face in time. But literal death is not all there is to death. Throughout the New Testament "death" is not merely the cessation of mortal life, but also a power that insinuates itself into the living of our days. Lent is the season that invites us to consider the spaces and places in our lives that are dead. To ask ourselves: where has this "power of death" touched us? What is dead in our relationships, in our church, in our society? What is dead within us, where we once had life? This kind of scrutiny is never easy. It is painful to acknowledge death and the denial of death is strong within us. To see the dead places within and without us can break our hearts. But our text today says that this very condition of heartbrokenness is a sacrifice acceptable to God. Because once we open our eyes to the ways the power of death has hold over us, and feel sorrow and remorse (which is what contrition means) God meets us there and can begin to ready us for the promised new life.'

On this third Sunday of Lent, it's death of the senseless and brutal kind where we are to meet God for the receiving of new life. In the opening to his devotional, 'On Hearing Bad News', Richard Hays brings us back to the moment when: 'Jesus is watching the news. It's the usual grim stuff: the imperial troops senselessly murder a few peasants, a tower collapses and kills 18 bystanders. "What do you think?" Jesus says to the press corps: "Do you think these poor fools were worse sinners than everybody else?" Uneasy silence. "No, I tell you: but unless you repent, you will all like-wise perish". What an astounding response. We expect. Jesus to condemn the brutality of the oppressors. After all, those Galileans that Pilate slaughtered were Jesus' compatriots. Surely such tyranny demands an

outcry of protest, perhaps even a call for revolutionary counter-violence---or at least (some strategy for preventing future tragedies). Surely Jesus could have responded with words of spiritual comfort like: 'Your loved ones are in a better place'; or 'He's not suffering now'; or some cosmic interpretation like: 'It was God's time to take your loved ones home'. But Jesus did not. Instead Jesus viewed death, whether unjustly inflicted or randomly encountered, as an occasion for METANOIA, a change of mind and reform of life.'

One change of mind about death that Jesus deemed his friends needed was in their crooked thinking. In Jesus' time Jews believed that sickness, poverty, and death was a sign of punishment from God. They were certain that the victims were sinners just getting everything from the hand of God that they deserved. So in order to correct their thinking, Jesus said, 'No, I tell you: but unless you repent, you will all like-wise perish.' If you think your Father in Heaven is hell bent on killing sinners, rather than being slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, merciful and just, then the Light of the Divine will go out in you. And if, you have no sorrow over precious lives lost and if you have no remorse over incorrectly blaming the victims for what happened to them, then the Holy Spirit will be unable to soothe your own sin sick soul.

After issuing the warning, Jesus told them a parable about a non-productive fig tree, patient gardener, and axe happy landowner. The land owner? Whenever I roll this parable around in my faith imagination, the landowner makes me think of Pilate and his violent regime in which his death squad does away with anything and anybody who is of no value to him. The gardener? I like him a lot. For me he is a metaphor for Jesus, the gardener who nurtures my soul by giving me whatever grace I need for seeing where the powers of death are sapping the life out of me. The fig tree? In Jesus' time and locale, the fig tree grew wild and was known for its sweet fruit. It was appreciated for its beauty and shade that it offered. It was valued for its medicinal sap that healed wounds and boils.

Metaphorically it was associated with the grapevine as a symbol of peace and prosperity. When I imagine myself the fig tree, I see myself as Jesus sees me . . . NOT as a victim of deadly powers that, in bad times keep me from blooming into the fullness on my best humanity, but rather, a blessed sweet soul of value in Love's reign, graced with faith's power who can contribute to the healing of God forsaken places in the world.

A 2016 Headline News Report

The morning ride started out calm. Everybody boarded, took their seats, and did their commuter thing. The usual unorganized peace prevailed until a disheveled man stumbled on board. At first blush, his disturbing manner and appearance wasn't all that upsetting to the regulars. But when the mumbling turned into shouting, cursing, and angry fist raising, everyone went on red alert. The closest to him stepped back. Those on the periphery froze, keeping their eyes glued on him. Then just at a moment when they expected an eruption of violent behavior, the man sank to the floor, sobbing. No one knew what to do. No one moved save for one woman, who went to the man and laid her hand gently on his shoulder. Within moments his sobbing ceased. . . and calm fell upon him. When someone asked the woman how she knew that's what the man needed, she simply said, "I don't know. I just felt called to go over and touch him.'

A Lenten miracle. Could it be that what our faith teaches us is true? Could it be that the sacrifice that God needs to keep deadly powers having their way with us, is nothing more, nothing less than that which the psalmist prayed was acceptable to God: a broken spirit and contrite heart? Could this be what it takes for the old ways of death to be disarmed and for new life to begin within and among us?

Prayer

'Come, Ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish
Come to the Mercy Seat, fervently kneel
Here bring your wounded heart, here tell your anguish
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal'.