

March 20, 2022 - 3rd Sunday of Lent - Reflection

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

“What have I done to deserve this?” or “How did I get into this mess?” Perhaps, like me, you have asked those questions while going through a difficult time. Sometimes the answer includes some mistake made in the past but often the cause of the problem is something beyond our control. We tend to think that every effect has an immediate cause but we hear a slightly different story in the Bible. To be sure, there is such a thing as ‘cause and effect’ but there are other factors involved in the process of life and in the readings for today we are asked to think about some of these other influences over our lives - particularly the place of God in the center of our hearts. In the Gospel passage offered for this week Jesus is asked his opinion about an event about which people are talking. In our day it would be similar to talking about the people of Ukraine - a kind of unspoken question asking the reasons behind the tragedy. Jesus does not answer the implied question of why this event happened directly but he does comment on the fact that those who were killed by Pilate were no better or worse than any other people. He emphasizes this fact by speaking about the accidental death of a number of people when a tower fell. Our minds want a ‘cause and effect’ connection - particularly for any pain or suffering we are experiencing - but the reality is that sometimes there is not immediate cause connected. This reality probably doesn’t bring a great deal of comfort to us but it is something with which we have to contend on a regular basis. To further complicate the matter Jesus doesn’t connect the actions of the people who suffered in these two stories with the outcomes but he urges his listeners to repent lest they suffer a similar fate. I confess to a bit of confusion over this so these statements push me to dig a little deeper to try to understand what Jesus is trying to say to us.

Jesus urges his listeners to ‘repent, or you too will perish’ which sounds like he is saying that a repentant believer will be protected from natural disasters or unfair punishment. Many Biblical scholars draw this sort of conclusion from these verses and while that may be true I wonder if Jesus was referring to the need to repent for the sake of our entrance into heaven. Part of our custom at Christ Church in Lively is to offer the Great Litany on the 2nd Sunday of Lent and there is a petition in the Great Litany that asks God to deliver us from ‘dying suddenly and unprepared’ which seems to me to be speaking about this need to repent. I believe Jesus is urging his followers to do what they need to do, on a regular basis, to remain in a good relationship with God so that should natural disaster or evil leaders bring death our eternal lives will be saved by God. The season of Lent always begins with a

call for all believers to be 'shriven' and for the Church in general to confess its corporate sin. Our culture has moved away from this act of personal confession on Shrove Tuesday in favour of pancakes or parties, and attendance at Ash Wednesday services has fallen off but it would seem that Jesus still calls for those actions. 'Repent and believe the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near' is still the primary message of Jesus to the world. While living in this broken and sometimes dangerous world turning back to God's ways after we have turned away is a recipe for blessings. I hear Jesus saying to avoid obsessing about the reasons and ask God to forgive your transgressions in order to have a fulfilled life.

Jesus then turns to a parable which emphasizes the second chance nature of a relationship with God. A fig tree is designed to bear fruit and so the expectation of this land owner who had a fig tree planted was that after a certain period of time figs would be produced and when that didn't happen the landowner ordered the tree to be cut down. We may wrestle with this parable because of the obvious connection to believers as being the fig tree. This isn't the only reference in scripture regarding the fruitfulness of believers. Remember that John the Baptist told those who came to him to 'bear fruit worthy of repentance' and Jesus often spoke about his disciples needing to be fruit bearers. There are passages in Isaiah that speak of the vineyard that God planted and protected that produced sour grapes. Furthermore St. Paul describes the 'fruit of the Spirit' when writing to the Christians in Galatia so the parallel is fairly obvious - we are the fig tree designed to bear fruit. Sometimes fig trees need extra attention in order to produce and so the gardener pleads for patience from the land owner and promises to spend that extra care. Once that is done, he said, if the tree still does not bear fruit it could be cut down. The clear meaning is that if we are not bearing fruit as we are designed to do there may be some drastic consequences but we are blessed to be given a second (or third or fourth ...) chance. Repentance and an open heart to receive the grace poured out for us is akin to the fig tree being tended with extra care in order that it will produce the fruit for which it is designed. As we allow the 'washing of the Word' to minister to us and we receive in our hearts the Grace of Jesus the potential for us to return to a stage of greater fruit production is opened.

Our lives are constantly being affected by things over which we have no control as well as by the decisions we make. This passage from Luke's Gospel points to a way to walk through this time with confidence that God is on our side throughout the troubles. Having an awareness of the steps we have taken that are not in line with God's will and purpose for our lives is part of being a disciple of Jesus and repentance is the way to get back into that will of God. This was part of the message that

long journey through the desert the Israelites took when escaping Egypt. The trip wasn't always easy but they were guided by God's pillar of cloud or pillar of fire. The season of Lent can be our reminder of the importance of following God throughout our journey - even when it is difficult. This may mean accepting some extra help from our fellow disciples and it may mean the need to confess and repent from something in our lives that is not in accordance with the will of God. Doing so may provide some additional protection from disaster in this life but it will certainly provide for a smooth entry into paradise and make our lives more fruitful. Jesus came to restore the pathway into a full and abundant life and has promised to send us the Holy Spirit to be our constant companion. Bearing God's fruit is part of what we were designed to do and repentance is the means we have to ensure that the connection between us and God remains clear and strong in order that the fruit we are meant to bear for the blessing of those around us is as abundant as possible. So, how is your garden growing? Is there evidence that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is growing in your lives or have weeds invaded? Is an extra treatment of God's fertilizing power required to bring your fruitfulness back or is some pruning needed? God's desire is that we bring His blessing into the world through which we walk while we enjoy the benefits of his presence in our lives. So rather than asking the question 'what did I do to deserve this?' or 'How did I get into this mess?' perhaps our question should be, 'am I being true to my calling as a disciple of Jesus?'

My prayer, as we continue through this season, is that we will heed the call of Jesus to 'repent and believe the good news' and that our lives will show evidence that the fruit of the Spirit is growing in us for the sake of those around us.

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