

Third Sunday in Lent March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9

I always balk a bit whenever I hear someone say something along the lines of, “How could this happen here?”

Usually, this comes on the heels of some unspeakable event; a murder or murders, war, a catastrophic building collapse, or other event that cuts deeply into our assumed certainty of “the way things are here”.

While I understand the reaction, because at least part of what it is saying is, “I don’t know how to process this... this ought not to be.” What often lies at the root of it is also the same thing Jesus is getting at in his response to these two current events in our reading from Luke. While the details of what happened exactly in Galilee or the Jerusalem neighborhood of Siloam might be unclear, Jesus’ message is not.

He looks at the crowd and, because they are human, knows what is going on in their heads and asks them, “Do you really think that the reason these things happened to them and not you has anything to do with your being in a better relationship with God than they were? Or their bringing it on themselves because of their own sinfulness or actions? That this could not happen to you because... you are better, live in a different place, are more privileged? If you think this way, then you need to repent”, Jesus says. Change your thinking or you will die as well.

The thinking that needs to change is, basically, the same thought that lies behind the exclamation, “How could this happen here?” The idea that our wealth, our formal education or lack thereof, our living situation; in a city, in a small town, on

a farm, our country of origin, our color, our strength, our attending church or not that any of these will stave off the reality that suffering and death can come for us all and that right quick.

You want to see the falsity of that kind of thinking? That we can in some way insulate ourselves from this reality? Look to the coach and six players on the University of the Southwest golf team who were killed collision Tuesday evening. Look at Ukraine and what has happened in that nation, that looks very much like our own, in just three weeks. Do you really think the millions of people who fled their homes, or the thousands who have been killed were any more sinful than you? Doing anything wrong? That they weren't in so many ways, just like you?

Change your thinking, Jesus says, or you will perish as well. Change the thinking of the façade of certainty that we know it all, can handle it all, can escape the inevitable by our own power.

While it isn't as harsh as Jesus can be in some other places, he is being direct here in stripping away the lies we surround ourselves with, ones that (as our text shows) are human nature- going back at least 2,000 years if not more. Lies that say it cannot happen to me because... of something I have done, or been, or am. What Jesus does is strip us bare, reveals our vulnerability, our lack of control. And we hate that, don't we? The one thing we hate to feel, to be, is out of control. To be at the mercy of circumstance, or anyone, or anything other than ourselves.

Repent, Jesus says, change your way of thinking.

The prophet Isaiah asks the question, "Why do you spend your resources on that which is not bread? The basics of what our bodies and souls need for life? Why

do you spend your time and energy on things that do not satisfy you, fill you, ultimately? Why do we waste those things on “empty calories” that look and taste good but don’t do anything for us?

Because they give us the sense that we are in control. That we are masters of our fate. That if I do XY and Z. If I am the perfect Christian, or eat healthy, or... I will be okay. Because they feed into the things that make us feel better about our circumstances. But there is a problem, it’s not true.

This is the gift of our Lutheran Christian understanding of ourselves, the world, and God. We acknowledge that it can happen here, to me, to that person over there, to the young and the old, the wicked and the innocent alike, because we live in a fallen world and sin, death, and the devil roam the land. We are what Martin Luther called Theologians of the Cross- we call a thing what it is.

Do you know what this is? It looks like a really nicely polished and shiny sphere. One you would perhaps display in your own home as a piece of artwork. You know what it really is? It is from a 2008 MythBusters episode where they checked to see if you really could polish a turd. Yep, for all it’s shiny, sleek, and modern exterior, that is poop.

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we know that you can polish a turd but it is still a poop. You can tell yourself all the lies you want about how the world works, about your ability to navigate it on your own, but that doesn’t mean that’s how things will go. So- what, does Jesus just want to strip us bare of our illusions and watch us twist in the wind for fun? Does that sound like Jesus? What is his point?

He gets to that in the parable of the barren fig tree that follows.

I tend to agree with the Rev. Mark Davis that we should be careful about assuming the landowners and vineyard owners in the parables are God. He points out that they tend to be rather severe folk and so he is inclined to think they are more a description of “this is how things seem to operate” to which God’s kingdom offers an alternative course.

In that reading, where this tree, that has not produced in three years and therefore it should be cut down, is how we and the world operate. That if you don’t do X, Y, or Z, if you are not productive you will get thrown away, cut down. That you are just a grand waste of space, using up resources that are better spent on something that will produce fruit. Do this, or bad things will happen.

This assumption that if you do not do the right things you will be cast off to die as useless, a waste of space and resources, is part of what Jesus is asking us to repent of. To change our thinking about.

In this, Jesus is calling us as his followers to be honest with ourselves and each other. To be willing to risk being vulnerable about ourselves, our own sinfulness, our own shortcomings, our own lack of control. To be vulnerable, about our fears.

The reason we can risk this vulnerability is because we trust in the gardener. Who in this case I think can be seen as Jesus, or at least the way the Kingdom of God works. The job of a gardener is to tend, to seek to grow, to bring forth produce from the plants of the garden. He is the one who is willing to put in the hard work to give this tree that seems like a waste of space another chance to produce.

Who stands between the condemned and the certainty of their destruction and says, with a little extra attention, this can become something.

This is what Jesus does for us, doesn't he? He is always standing between us and whatever seeks to condemn us, even ourselves! He says, "No, there is hope here yet. Let's feed it some more, prune it a bit, give it everything it needs in the belief that there is life in it yet. That it is worth the effort."

This is the God we worship, the Master we follow. The one who knows the value of acknowledging the truth of this fallen world, that disease, death, and suffering are not because of something you did or didn't do. Life and the reality of sin in the world are more complex than that. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he himself, an innocent one, will suffer greatly and die. Because others could not change their thinking. Could not be vulnerable and hear the grace of God.

So, our God is one who understands suffering. Who calls us to be vulnerable with one another. To repent, change our thinking that hides the truth, that thinks we do not need the gardener to care for us as well, and who invites us to invest ourselves not in polished turds, but that bread which truly satisfies.

The Word and teaching of Jesus. Who will always love us unconditionally, who will forgive endlessly, who always sees in us the potential for bearing wonderful fruit in the world. Fruit that comes when we are fed, pruned, and fertilized by that which comes from the kingdom of God. Jesus' Body and Blood. The Word of God proclaimed, read, heard, spoken, lived.

And when we change our thinking. When we are vulnerable with one another and with God. When we accept the truth of things. When we begin to offer

ourselves and each other yet another chance to produce fruit. And another. And another. We truly escape that which seems to drive so much of what we do. We truly escape death.

Because we have found true life. Bread that satisfies. And in Christ, the one who conquers even death itself.

This is the Kingdom I want to live in. One abandons delusion and acknowledges the truth. One that always looks to how we can help others grow – not give them a limit then cut them down. One that has compassion on those suffering and in need- because we know that it could just as easily be us. One that is ruled by our Lord Jesus who knows what innocent suffering is, who always gives us one more chance, and who is more powerful than any enemy we might face. Even death.

In Jesus is the truth. Pure and glorious. In him is life- fuller and more abundant.

Repent, change your thinking, change your heart. Call on Jesus and his Holy Spirit to help you do so. Repent, change your thinking, Change your heart. So that you may live with the gardener who loves you so.