

Third Sunday in Lent
Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9
March 24, 2019
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*55:1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*

55:2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

55:3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

55:4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

55:5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

55:6 Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

55:7 let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

55:9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

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Luke 13:1-9

13:1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

13:2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

13:3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

13:4 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?"

13:5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

13:6 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.

13:7 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?'

13:8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

13:9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

What does it all mean? These are difficult scriptures. Take the fig tree parable at the end of Luke, for instance, that's a familiar image this spring, trees and their nourishment. A few weeks back I likened a congregational family to Aspen—which appears as separate trees, but it is in truth one living organism—and we spoke about nourishment being key to its survival. So the fig tree in the parable today reminds us of this, right? The gardener amending the soil to infuse it with nutrients from the manure. And the Isaiah passage speaks of nourishment as well, “Come to the waters; eat what is good!” The message seems simple enough; the sermon should focus on nourishment again, right?

But what about the part where Isaiah says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts says the Lord; my ways, not your ways.” Nourishment is not mysterious, but the ways of God are... and Isaiah is saying this to a people who are convinced of their own righteousness and salvation and condemning of others who they deem less worthy. Isaiah rebukes them for assuming they know the ways and the thoughts of God!

That'll preach, right? Self-righteousness...

And nourishment?

But then, also, there is that cryptic first part of Luke: what happened to the Galilean people who were killed? And those killed by the tower? These events aren't explained in the scripture we read today yet they are clearly tragic events that have scarred the followers of Jesus and they look to him for answers.

There are lots of directions we can take with these readings this morning: Should we just brush over the tragedies and focus on nourishment again? Or spend the next 15-20 minutes being reminded not to judge others, like Isaiah warns us? Or should we dare *talk* about the tragedies and how the people were rattled to their core?

To all these questions I answer: yes, and yes, and...yes. We're going to talk about all of them because together they form a powerful message, so stay with me.

About 2 weeks ago now, I was confronted with a very difficult question: "How could this have happened?" It was asked with all the angst and anguish and painful disbelief that any one of us might have when it appears that God could allow such bad things to happen to such good people. The person on the other end of the phone was my best friend Dave and he was referring to our childhood friend, Greg. "How could this have happened...to GREG? He's been the healthiest of ALL of us? He's got two young children, and he's a doctor! He's spent his whole career helping people to be healthy, how does this make sense?"

For those of you who don't know, Greg just learned last month that he has advanced stage liver cancer and—barring some miracle clinical trial—he's been given a devastating prognosis. I had told you about Greg, and these last few weeks we've been praying for him. But on the phone with Dave that day, he wasn't just expressing a rhetorical question, "How could this have happened?" He wanted to understand, he needed to understand. Dave is a Christian, very committed to his church and living a life of deep faith. And he was asking me—a minister—how could this have happened?

I imagine this is what the people of Christchurch in New Zealand were asking last weekend; how could this have happened? The people killed at the Al-Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Center were

worshipping; this was a house of worship! How could this have happened? We are no strangers to this in our own country; when the worshippers were gathered at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh last Fall, we all asked “How could this have happened?” Mass shootings are horrible no matter where they might happen but in our houses of worship, where we are open, trusting and vulnerable, it just seems particularly injurious and cruel.

So, although it may not be obvious to the reader at first blush, the scripture today refers to an act of violence during worship. The Galileans, likely while they were in Jerusalem, were slaughtered while performing an act of sacrifice. At the beginning of this Luke passage, the people ask Jesus about this tragic event. Now, historians are perplexed by this reference because there is nothing in the historical record to explain it. But they can attest to the fact that Pilate, the governor of Judea at the time, was rather draconian in his leadership style, heavy-handed in meting out Roman justice. Josephus—the Jewish historian—recorded among the many dirty deeds of Pilate, the mass killing of Samaritan pilgrims on Mt. Gerizim. Ordered by Pilate and carried out by Roman soldiers, they were slaughtered while in an act of worship. So, it isn’t too far a reach to give credence to this event only hinted at in Luke. The Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices: these Galilean Jews were likely in Jerusalem—Pilate’s jurisdiction—when their blood was spilled while making sacrifices, likely in the Temple. Given the grotesque nature of the mass shootings in New Zealand last weekend, this event in today’s lectionary passage seems to be a timely placement and important to the message for today. “Jesus, how could this have happened?”

It might be important to appreciate that in the previous chapter in Luke, Jesus has been warning the people about being ready for times of difficulty and division. So perhaps the people were asking about the Galileans in response to these warnings. They appear to be asking Jesus, “How could this have happened? Or—more pointedly—WHY did this happen to *these* people in particular?” Did they have it

coming? Were they sinners? Were they false worshippers, performing sacrificial rites for their own vanity rather than being humble and prostrating themselves before the LORD? We don't get this interpretation directly from the text, but Jesus' response to the people implies this might be their thinking. He replies, do you think they are worse sinners than other Galileans because this happened to them? Jesus recognizes that they are trying to figure out why this would happen, what is the calculus that causes untimely death to come to some and not others.

And what about those who were killed in an accident in Jerusalem? When the tower of Siloam fell on them—did they deserve it?"

And we ask those same questions, don't we? When something bad happens, we want to believe there is an explanation. Someone we love gets sick, we want to know why. There's an accident and someone dies, but why? There's an earthquake or a hurricane or some natural disaster and people die. Why? There must be a reason. Doesn't everything happen for a reason? Did God cause this? Or maybe he didn't *cause* it, but he chose not to prevent it?

When Annie was in high school one of her classmates was killed in a car accident. She wanted to go to the memorial service and so I said I would go with her. As we sat in the congregation with a lot of weeping teenagers, the pastor spoke about the wonderful qualities of the young woman who had died. And then, I'm sure to be reassuring, he said that God decided that it was her time, and so he took her to be with him in heaven. That didn't sit well with Annie and on the way home we had a long talk because, in her mind, that explanation made her doubt her faith in God. In that moment, she saw God as capricious and untrustworthy, and not as a loving parent. Now, to be clear, the pastor wasn't saying Annie's friend deserved it, but he did say God caused this to happen. How could a God who loves us cause such a thing to happen and cause such pain among us?

So to the Jews of Jesus' time, there were still many who believed that if a bad thing happened to you,

you must have done something to deserve it. Much of the Hebrew Scriptures are written with this idea in mind—the nation of Israel suffers when they are disobedient to God, on the other hand, when they are faithful, they prosper. Now it may be true that disobedience causes suffering—to live your life recklessly, with disregard for the welfare of others will undoubtedly cause suffering to others and eventually to you, BUT it is not true that all suffering therefore must be a result of disobedience. This archaic belief that justice is direct and predictable was still prevalent, despite the earlier warnings of Isaiah that we read today “Your ways are not my ways; your thoughts are not my thoughts, says the LORD” And Jesus reminds the people that those who perished in these tragic events were no more sinners than anyone else.

How could this have happened?

We ask it over and over again without an answer. Or maybe we try to answer it, to understand God’s action or inaction by judging the person, their life, their choices. Isaiah and Jesus both warn against this yet we still do it.

How could this have happened?

Perhaps we will always ask this. But once we’ve exhausted this question with no answer, maybe we should turn our attention to a different question and this question is revealed to us in the parable of the fig tree. The tree grew for three years without bearing fruit and the owner of the vineyard was ready to cut it down. But the gardener intervened, pleading with the owner that he should give it one more year, one more year to take in good nourishment, and then we’ll see if the tree is fruitful. Jesus tell us this parable at this point in response to the people because he wants them--he wants us--to know that life on this earth is finite. We have limited time. So the question to ask is: what will *you* do with the time you have?

Lately we have been using a benediction that we've borrowed from the Episcopal church and it seems to fit here because it begins, "Remember that life is short, and we do not have much time." That's true. Life is short and we don't have all the time in the world. What do we do when we realize that we don't have much time? Jesus is the gardener who looks at us and loving us, tells the landowner that this tree can still bear fruit. Because that's what we are here for, that's what we are supposed to do with the time we have left, bear fruit. The benediction continues, "We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us, so be swift to love, make haste to be kind, and go in peace to love and serve the Lord." What do we do with the time we have left? That's the big question. Not why. All time, all life is a gracious gift of God and we are to use whatever we have of it to take in nourishment in order to bear fruit for God's glory.

(hold up star) Remember these? For those of you who were here on Epiphany Sunday we each were given a star to remember the Star of Bethlehem. But each star had a word written on it and that was our word for the year, a word to accept as a gift, to meditate on, to think about the ways it can be nourished, the way it works in our lives. Because each of the star words is one of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the fruits that the gardener is coaxing to grow from the trees that are our lives.

We are mortal, whatever time we have is a gift of God. The real question is, what will we do with the time that we have been given? When tragedy strikes, what do we do? Lose ourselves in the question of *why* this happens? Trying in vain to understand the workings of God? I'm sure we do, we're human. But when we're done wrestling with this question that provides no answer, we turn to the *next* question, what are we going to do—we who remain—with the time we have left? Will we nourish our garden, by feasting on the word, bowing in prayer and worship, caring for one another, making our world a little better because we were here, and so bear fruit worthy of the Kingdom of God? Let us be swift to love and make haste to be kind . . .