

Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022
 “Turn Around” (Luke 13:1-9)

Over the past two years, we have dealt with a serious pandemic. Millions have gotten sick and recovered, but hundreds of thousands died. What made the difference between living and dying? Were the ones who lost their lives greater sinners than those who survived? Was death a punishment for their sins? Or what about the war in Ukraine? Has that country been invaded because of the sins of the Ukrainian people? Or what about the outbreak of tornadoes earlier this year? Were those who lost their homes or their lives more sinful than those who were not impacted? Our gospel text for this morning deals with one of the most troubling theological concerns of all time. What is the meaning of suffering?

What many tend to do is associate suffering with sinful or foolish behavior. They believe that people get what they deserve, that we live in a cause-and-effect world. If you do A, the B will be the result that follows. It's a tit for tat universe. This way of thinking was no different in Jesus' day. We know from the Old Testament – especially from Deuteronomic history – that in Israel there was a fundamental trust that good behavior was rewarded by God, while bad behavior was punished.

But in today's gospel, something has happened to shake the people's belief in this cosmic karma. A group of Galileans had been killed while making sacrifices in the Temple. The execution had been ordered by Pilate, who had suspected the group of planning a revolt. So, a number of people come to Jesus asking, *Why did these people have to die? Why were they killed?* But Jesus responds with a question of his own: *Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans?* He then reminds them of another incident where eighteen people were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them. Then Jesus asks, *Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?*

The answer to both questions is a resounding no. No, they were not worse sinners. Sometimes there is cause and effect. If you park your car under a tree where birds gather, then your car will be messed up. If you leave water outside in subzero weather, it will freeze. If you poke a hornet's nest, you will get stung. But in the matter of this text, Jesus says that it is not cause and effect. Great evil does not necessarily produce great misfortune. On the other hand, great goodness does not necessarily produce great fortune.

These people have asked the age-old question: *Why?* Why would this happen? What is God up to in the world? Were these people sinners who deserved this punishment? You see, they are putting God on trial here. But notice that Jesus doesn't answer their *why* questions at all. He doesn't answer them because humans cannot call God into question. God call us into question. *Unless you repent, Jesus says, you will all perish as they did.* And he says this two times.

Let's look at what Jesus does here. First, he blows a hole in their theory. The people who suffered calamity were not more sinful than others as those coming to Jesus suppose. But then, instead of explaining why these people have suffered, he uses these incidents as warnings to repent. He reminds them that it is time to turn around. Jesus seems to be saying, *Why spend your time speculating about the sinfulness of others when there is more than enough sin in your own*

life? Why distract yourselves with those issues when you need to focus on repenting of your own sin, when you need to be concerned with repairing your own relationship with God? Unless you repent of your sins and turn to God for grace, you, too, will suffer a tragic death, for there is nothing more tragic than the death of an unrepentant sinner.

And we do like to look at the sins of others more than our own, don't we? How many times have we said or thought, *I may have my faults, but they are nothing compared to his or hers.* Or consider the high profile trials that have filled the nightly news the past year or so. Why do these get so much coverage? The news outlets cover it for us, the viewers. We love to point out the sinfulness and shortcomings of others because that takes the focus off of us. We don't have to face our own sinfulness when we see the grievous sin of others. But what we fail to see is that the telephone or coffee pot gossip in which we engage is just as destructive as murder.

We seem to have a built-in barometer for measuring the severity of sin. Therefore, if we don't commit the horrible sins that others do, then we really don't see ourselves as sinners. But God uses no barometer. A sin is a sin. When we turn our backs to God and destroy that relationship, we have sinned – no matter how we try to rank the sin in terms of severity. And God pleads with us, *Realize that you are a sinner and repent. Turn around – turn away from your sinfulness and toward me.*

Every day, we should be turning to the Lord in repentance. Just as our blood needs recycling, and our lungs clean oxygen, and our kidneys dialysis, we need the grace and forgiveness of God at all times. We need the life that comes to us through the cross of Jesus Christ. To breathe well for fifty years is no guarantee of breath in the morning. Just because a Boeing 747 has safely flown hundreds of thousands of miles, there is no guarantee of its safety tomorrow. Just because there hasn't been a flood in 100 years does not mean that the heavens won't burst open tomorrow. Just because a country has experienced 30 years of independence doesn't mean that it won't be invaded tomorrow.

Psalm 103 tells us that each of us flourishes like a flower in the field. When the wind blows over it, it is gone. and its place remembers it no more. And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compares us to the grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven. We are guaranteed only the present. Therefore, Christ wants us to repent. He wants us to hear the urgency in his message. Tragedy may befall us tomorrow. It won't mean that we are more sinful than others, but without repentance, Jesus tells us it will be disastrous: *I tell you, he says, unless you repent, you will all perish.* He tells us that we need to repent of our selfish, greedy, and violent ways or we will perish both physically and spiritually.

At this point, Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree to help us understand what he is saying. When the owner of the vineyard observed the fruitlessness of the fig tree, he said, *This tree is bearing no fruit. Cut it down. It is wasting the soil and only taking up space.* And that's a reasonable expectation, isn't it? If the tree is properly nurtured and cared for, and the conditions for fruitfulness are present, there is no reason for its barrenness. Therefore, it is only taking up space.

The fig tree can be understood to represent people who are leading fruitless lives. I wonder how many of us are just taking up space, not because we don't have the ability to produce, but because we are unwilling to do so.

The vinedresser in this parable serves as a kind of Christ figure who argues our case before God. *Sir, let it alone for one more year. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.* God, you see, calls for lives that bear fruit. And God calls for repentance. These two go hand in hand. Only through repentance are we forgiven. And only through forgiveness are we empowered for fruitful service.

But God is gracious in his call. God is willing to give us time. God is patient in that he doesn't merely cut us off when we don't produce the fruits of the Spirit, but attempts to stimulate us to growth and maturity. Yet, even though God may extend our season for growth and faithfulness, God's patience is not without limit. God requires that we do more than just take up space.

This Lenten season, God calls us to turn around. Christ calls us to repent of our sins and receive God's forgiveness. When we do this, God releases us from the power of sin. And only then do we have the possibility to become what God created us to be – children of God, young and old, each able to produce the fruits of faith. No, we can't explain why some suffer and others do not. But Jesus tells us that, as sinners, if we do not turn around – if we do not repent – it could be tragic for us, for nothing is more tragic than an unrepentant sinner.

Yet, the good news is that God is patient with us, giving us the time to grow and reach our potential as fruit-bearing Christians. So, return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you will bear fruit,