

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Third Sunday of Lent - Year C
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Isaiah 55:1-9
Pslam 63:1-8
I Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9
03/20/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.²[Jesus] asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” ⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Returning to the Lord

Good morning! I'll be honest, when I first read this Gospel reading, I was a little unsure. One of the benefits of having a forgetful memory is that I have no recollection of preaching this text three years ago, so it all seems fresh and new. But after reading it, I had some serious doubts about this text. So I read the text again, and again... and I still had no idea what was exactly going on. It seems likely that if I'm having a tough time following a text, the rest of us are too. So, let's take a closer look at today's reading, because once we know a little more, I hope I can convince you that it truly is a perfect lesson for the season of Lent.

As is usually the case, we pick up our story in the middle of another story. "At that very time" it reads, but it's not really helpful or central to the text in front of us. What IS important is what this group tells Jesus: current events. It seems that Pilate has been up to no good. It can be easy to forget that Pilate is not a very likable guy. For the most part, our interaction with him is limited to his appearance in the crucifixion story, where, while he doesn't come off as a good guy, is LESS of a bad guy. And while the event outlined in our text only shows up in the Gospel of Luke¹, all indications are that Pilate was a cruel and violent person. Jeremy L. Williams writes that "*Pilate was a direct appointee of the Roman empire who had a track record for being a blood-thirsty, violent ruler. Pilate epitomizes the fear-inducing brutality that Roman provincial subjects, like Jesus, daily*

¹ Johnson, Luke T., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 211.

*experienced directly or indirectly.*² This account would have been especially troubling since Jesus was a Galilean. It also seems to suggest that Pilate mixed the blood of these people with their sacrifices, desecrating a sacred religious ritual in the process. It takes a special kind of corrupt person to desolate spiritual practices, or say, I don't know, maybe bomb a maternity hospital? Or a theater full of people hiding from violence. But anyway....

I misread, or misunderstood the next section of our Gospel. It reads *“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”* But Luke Timothy Johnson offers a better translation writing *“Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, and that's why they suffered this way?”*³ It seems that the group is suggesting that because of sins committed on the part of these slaughtered Galileans, they merited the treatment they received, as if God was punishing them for what they had done wrong. Jesus brings up what must have been another recent event, when eighteen were crushed under a tower in Siloam. Were they too worse sinners? Deserving of their death? It reminds me of the story in the Gospel of John, chapter 9 where Jesus' disciples ask if a man born blind was the culprit of the sin or if it was the blind man's parents. The prevailing thought that Jesus is fighting against is the belief that bad things only happen to bad people, and that they “deserve” what happens to them. Jesus reminds them that unless everyone repents, we all will deserve whatever is coming. It's a wonderfully Lutheran perspective. As St. Paul writes in Romans 3:23 *“since*

²<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-5>

³ Johnson, Luke T., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 210.

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” none of us truly deserve God’s grace!

But! There is always hope! To illustrate this point Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. The point serves as a reminder for all of us. We are like the fig tree, and we have two options. We can bear fruit, or continue to languish, sucking up the health in the soil, depriving those around us from flourishing. Williams pushes the point even further, writing that *“Jesus’ message is clear: do not be like the fruitless tree. Rather than focus on the gravity of others’ transgressions, make sure you are producing good. Instead of assigning causality to others misfortune, ensure that you are not ignoring your own missing fruit.”*⁴

The Greek and Hebrew word for repent both carry the concept of literally turning away from your destructive behavior. Turning, I would argue towards God who is offering something so much better.

And what is God offering? Well... I’m glad you asked. *“1Ho, 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. 2Why 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. 3Incline 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. 4See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run*

⁴<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-5>

to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”⁵

So, return, or turn back to God. A God who offers us abundantly more than we could ever ask or imagine. Amen.

⁵ Isaiah 55:1-5 NRSV