

Homily for Lent 3C
March 20, 2022
S. Stephen's, Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The scene that we step into in this morning's Gospel reading
is one that we could easily reimagine
set among today's current events.

People have come to Jesus and ask him his thoughts
about a recent tragedy,

one which involved a very cruel fate for people they likely knew.

Some of their fellow Galileans, possibly neighbors or even relatives,
were executed during a religious observance

by the cruel hand of Pilate,

the Roman Governor of Judea.

Such an event would have struck fear and terror among the population,
which was what it was designed to do.

The Judeans of Jesus' time

lived under that constant threat of cruel violence

at the hand of their Roman occupiers.

Common wisdom of the day associated sin and divine retribution.

In other words, when something bad happened,
it was a result of something you had done.

Jesus refuses to let them conflate or confuse random acts of violence
with God's justice, or God's activity.

He asks them rhetorically, "Were those who were killed
somehow worse sinners than all the other Galileans?"

To his own question, he answers with an emphatic "No."

He then alludes to another contemporary tragedy in Jerusalem,
in which eighteen people were killed when a tower collapsed.

Were those eighteen any worse sinners than the rest of Jerusalem?

Again, no.

As I said a moment ago,

it is not hard to re-cast today's Gospel reading in current events.

Swap out Pilate and the occupying forces of Rome

for Putin and the Ukrainian war,

and any number of untold tragedies that have befallen innocent civilians
in the last few weeks.

Did they do anything to deserve this? No.

Were those who died in the condo collapse in Surfside, Florida last year any worse or any different from other citizens of that town?

No.

It is as if Jesus is saying, “Sometimes, bad things just happen.”

That is not a particularly comforting sentiment, especially when we turn to the church or our faith for assurance and comfort in times of strife or sadness.

What exactly is Jesus offering us here, then?

Well,

among all the things we can focus on, especially when it comes to tragedies or difficult circumstances, it would appear that Jesus is pointing out to us the one thing we can control amidst all the other things that we cannot: our selves.

Or rather, amidst all the things that we cannot change, we can change our own minds and our own responses.

And so he offers them a parable,

which, as parables are meant to do,

redirects and shifts the focus.

It shows us something from a different angle, namely, God's angle.

Jesus frames this in terms of repentance,

which is a word you've been hearing a lot of since Ash Wednesday.

However,

if all we think about when we hear the word repentance

is falling on our knees and being very sorry for the wrong we have done,

or going around looking sad and feeling bad about ourselves,

then Jesus' response will not make very much sense.

In fact, it will seem downright cruel when he says to his fellow Galileans,

“Unless you repent, you will all perish like those that Pilate executed.”

Repenting means to turn around and follow God's ways –

to literally stop in your tracks and re-direct – turn around –

which hopefully results in a change of behavior and,

just as important,

a change in outlook or perspective.

Jesus refuses to allow those in our Gospel reading

to confuse the activity of Rome and Pilate –

a cruel thug –

with the divine activity of God.

God did not cause or allow that tragedy to befall them

anymore than God did not cause the tower in Jerusalem to collapse.

If that is the way you conceive of God and God's activity,

think again, Jesus says.

Furthermore, this is life – things happen, both good and bad.

Sometimes things are within our control, sometimes they aren't.

You can't change that, but you can change yourself,

so that when those trials and tribulations come your way,

you are in a better position to confront and endure them.

Failure to do so, Jesus suggests,

will result in being caught suddenly and unprepared,

and your end just as tragic and no different than those who Pilate killed.

So do the work of being prepared,

and don't be surprised that these things happen.

The parable Jesus uses next with the fig tree is essentially saying just that.

The fig tree in question has not yielded any fruit for three years.

It is dead and useless – literally wasting the ground it is occupying.

When the owner tells the gardener to cut it down,

the gardener asks for a chance to revive it and give it some extra attention.

Should the tree not produce fruit within the year,

its removal will not be a surprise.

It will not catch the gardener unprepared.

Jesus' message is clear: do not be like the fruitless tree.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist urges those following him to bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Repentance –

the changing of our ways, our behavior, and our perspective –

repentance and fruitfulness are linked throughout Luke's Gospel.

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.

Jesus suggests that doing this work of tending to the gardens

of our own minds, our own souls, and our own hearts,
is our best hope to prevent or even persevere through unexpected calamity.

This kind of pruning or tending to the garden of our souls
is precisely what we are called to in this season of Lent.

On Ash Wednesday, you were invited in the name of the Church
to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance.

Some of you, like myself, have given up certain things for Lent.

That is all well and good.

But if we fail to do the soul-searching and self-examination
that we are invited to do,

then perhaps we've missed out on a serious opportunity
for change –

change that helps us to see things from God's perspective,
and helps us to align our ways with God's ways –

to repent – to stop and turn around and re-focus, re-frame, and re-direct.

To not do that work is to do so at our own peril, Jesus seems to say.

Perhaps those are not the comforting words you came here seeking today.

With all that is going on in the world,

if you're like me, you come to church and to Scripture wanting a hug –
some embrace of comfort and assurance.

Jesus instead seems to give us a pat on the cheek this morning,
with a gesture of “keep your chin up, kid” instead of a hug.

Last week, he invoked the image of a mother hen using her wings
to both embrace and protect her young.

Like all good mothers, Jesus yearns to protect us – yes –
but like a good mother,

he also wants to prepare us for the world we will inhabit,
with all its ups and downs – its fortunes and misfortunes.

God does not cause bad things to happen,
neither does he allow them to happen,
nor promise they will not happen.

But God is faithful.

God does watch over us,
and he hears the cries of his children.

The promise of God's faithfulness and abiding presence
that we heard in his declaration to Moses in our reading from Exodus

is a promise that is still ongoing.

The covenant of his abiding presence reached its fulfillment in Jesus,
who, with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,
never leaves us comfortless.

“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age,” he promises us.

Whatever trials and tribulations come our way,
God abides with us.

As you do the work of Lent and examine your own mind and soul,
you do so with his abiding presence.

If there is a word of comfort to be found today,
that is it:
you are never alone.

God’s faithfulness abides,
and he will never leave nor forsake us.

Amen.