***HOLY HORTICULTURE***

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Texts: Luke 13:1-9 and Isaiah 5:1-7

As some of you know, there is something called the Revised Common Lectionary which offers four suggested Scripture readings for each Sunday of the year: a Psalm, another Old Testament text, a passage from the epistles, and a Gospel reading. Often the texts connect in an obvious way; for instance the 23rd Psalm and Jesus’ declaration, “I am the good shepherd!” may be suggested for the same day. But sometimes the connection is less clear or a little dubious. Often the readings fit the season of the church year – Lent for today – but sometimes that connection too is a little obscure. Sometimes the passages are beloved and well-known, but sometimes they are relatively unknown, or even odd. Those lectionary texts are the starting point for my preparation of a sermon and planning for worship week to week. That planning begins a few months out as I read texts for each Sunday in the hope that a whisper from the Holy Spirit will say, “That’s the one for that day!”

When I looked at the texts for this Sunday several months ago, there was no whisper of the Spirit immediately apparent, or if there was, I wasn’t listening. Over the past several years I have preached on three of the passages for this day, and I just knew you all would be thinking, “Didn’t he just preach on this text three years ago!” But the remaining text was this passage from Luke, and it seemed so odd with its account of Pilate mixing the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices, a tower falling on people, and a parable about a barren fig tree, that I was sure God could not be directing me toward this text – and by the end of this sermon you may conclude that my first instincts were right on that count. With no other text identified for this Sunday as I began my intensive preparations for this Sunday last week I went back to reread the lectionary passages for this day and suddenly a new light was shined on these words from Luke.

I read about Pilate mingling the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices (suggesting his murder of the people during their worship) and thought about the Muslim worshipers gunned down in the midst of their prayers in Christchurch. I read about the tower of Siloam tumbling down on the poor people below, killing eighteen, and I thought of the poor people in the path of the cyclone in East Africa that killed hundreds. This passage was not as disconnected as I first thought. Both Pilate and the shooter in Christchurch were the vicious causes of human tragedies. The tumbling tower and cyclone were disasters that happened without ill intent. All these incidents – then and now – resulted in sudden, multiple, tragic deaths. What had seemed like an odd text for us to read this day suddenly seemed relevant to recent events in our world.

Tragedies happen – in the 1st century and in the 21st century. Some are the result of human sinfulness and some the result of tragic accidents and some the result of the vagaries of Mother Nature – like cyclones, floods, and tornados. Two thousand years after Jesus walked the earth, we are not exempt from such dangers. So perhaps the questions which arose from the 1st century tragedies are not wholly unlike some of the questions arising from these 21st century disasters.

The question posed to Jesus out of those first century deaths was about those who had died – were their deaths somehow God’s punishment for their sins? Was the horrific slaughter of those folks at the altar of the Lord – a horror magnified by the blood of the victims being mixed with the blood of their sacrifices – was this God’s great judgment upon them for sins which were greater than those of folks who died in their sleep? It is the theology of Job’s friend who kept urging him to confess what terrible thing he had done to deserve God’s punishment in the disasters that befell him. It has its 21st century equivalent in the irksome voice of Pat Robertson who suggested that 9/11 was God’s punishment for those sins about which he had been preaching. It is a theology that suggests that disasters are God-ordained and deaths God’s will, as if a loving God would desire that the twin towers come crashing down upon all those within its walls. Was it really their particular sins that led to their deaths – sins beyond those of us who watched with horror as it happened?

To that corrupt theology Jesus offers a resounding NO! God does not will for Pilate to slaughter worshipers at the altar or a shooter to kill Muslims at prayer. God does not will towers to topple on those passing below or send cyclones to kill all the men, women, children, and animals in its path. There is evil in the world, and sometimes that evil manifests itself in death. History is replete with examples, including the cross toward which we journey this Lenten season. There are accidents which take lives, and violent storms that wreak destruction from time to time, but these are not the instruments of an angry God who is looking to punish sinners with particularly violent death. God mourns every loss of life in such circumstances, mourns with us and for us as a parent mourns for his or her child, for we are all children of God.

But there is a second question to which Jesus turns his attention in considering these tragedies. It is a question bound up in Jesus’ curious statement: “*Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did*.” How did they perish? In the blink of an eye, through no fault of their own, without time to get their affairs in order or get right with God. *Unless you repent you will die as they did*, he says, and the question at the core of that statement is this: When will you repent of your sins? These violent deaths do not reflect the sudden judgment of an angry God for inordinate sinfulness, but they do remind us how fragile life is. One moment the people were doing what they do in their daily lives, and in the next they were dead and gone. Do not think that you have all the time in the world to get your life together and to get right with God, suggests Jesus. Do not take life for granted; life is fragile! Make the most of the time you have, each and every day, for stuff happens, tragedies occur, not only to others far away in New Zealand or Mozambique or Nebraska, but here too.

Lent is a time to stop and take stock of such questions and your own response. When will you repent? The word *repent* is rooted in a Hebrew word meaning *turn*. To repent is to turn – to turn away from sin and to turn toward God, to turn away from who we’ve been and turn toward who we might be. It is not just saying “I am sorry” for sins of the past; it is turning toward a new path for the future, a more faithful way, God’s way. The early Christian movement was called simply that – the Way. It is the way of God that we embrace, the way that Jesus showed us, a way of living and loving and forgiving day to day. Repentance begins with renouncing the old way of sin, but it also demands that we embrace this new way of God. With that in mind, I ask you again the question posed by Jesus’ response to those folks lamenting the horrific deaths: When will you repent? If something were to happen tomorrow – a terrible tragedy or medical emergency or zombie apocalypse – would you be good with God or would you find yourself making excuses for your procrastination?

In the passage we read from Isaiah this morning we hear God’s frustration vented through the prophet in horticultural terms. God has planted this beloved vineyard of Israel and given them everything they needed to survive – protection, nurture, tender care – but the vineyard proved wholly unproductive; instead of the choice grapes the vineyard owner hoped for, the vineyard produced only wild grapes that were of no good use. The vineyard owner had done all that he could do. What was left to be done? Destroy the vineyard and start anew, or abandon the vineyard and let the unruly grapes run wild at the mercy of the briars and thorns and drought that would eventually make the vineyard into a wasteland. In the Babylonian exile God’s people thought that the parable had come to life in their lives, that God had abandoned them, until the same prophet brought to them the promise of replanting and restoration of that vineyard which had felt long-abandoned by God.

Perhaps that parable was on the minds of those who heard Jesus’ words about repentance. Was it already too late? Had God abandoned them, making repentance irrelevant? In his parable of the fig tree, Jesus draws parallels with Isaiah’s parable, but suggests a different result. Like the vineyard in Isaiah the fig tree is unproductive. For three years the one who planted it came looking for fruit and found none with no encouraging signs that it would yet be fruitful. What should be done? Abandon it, suggested Isaiah’s parable. But the gardener urges a little more time – time for him to tend it: to aerate the soil and fertilize it and see if it might yet prove productive. *Give me one more year*, urges the gardener. *It may yet be fruitful*.

Might you yet be fruitful in God’s vineyard? Is there time to repent? *Yes!* says Jesus. For God has not given up on us. Jesus came to tend to us – to nurture and enrich our lives in the hope that we might yet be made productive in this corner of the vineyard. There is still time, urges Jesus. It is not an indefinite time. It is not without risk of sudden tragedy intervening. But do not think that it is an exercise in futility. Frederick Buechner suggests:

*To repent is to come to your senses...True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying, “Wow!”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

That is what God wants of us and for us – repentance that turns us away from our sorry pasts to the glorious future of God’s *Wow*! Without delay, without excuse, without fear, God wants us to repent and embrace the Wow of God! This is the third Sunday in Lent. When then will you repent, my brothers and sisters? If not now, then when? Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1973, p.79 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)