

Lent 3C 20 March 2022
Luke 13:1-9
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He 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.'" Let's pray: . . .

It shouldn't be news to anyone that the country, Ukraine, is being attacked by Russia. There's been widespread destruction of historical buildings, businesses, homes and infrastructure. Many Ukrainians have fled seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. But the worst nightmare to contemplate is the loss of human life and the deep psychological scars that will shape the futures of all involved. The Ukrainians are people who, until a few weeks ago, were going about their lives peacefully, just as we are today. What's particularly confronting and shocking to us is that many of the people killed so far were "innocent." This, I believe, sticks in everyone's craw; personally, it upsets me deeply. But the thorny question that I must pose, as prickly as it may seem is: Would it be any different if those killed were guilty?

“Of course not!” is the correct answer. We know the right answer. Regardless of how it happens, death is always tragic. But I want to push you a little further, needle your conscience a little more, maybe even offend you. I reckon if we’re brutally honest we might answer more truthfully, “Yes, it would be different if they were guilty.” Does my suggestion shock you? Are you offended? Maybe you have an inkling of where I’m going with this. I say this, because like you, I’m human. We need things to make sense. We need rational explanations. We crave a sense of order, predictability, and ultimately control in a world in which those things are often difficult to find. I say that it would be different because it would offer some reason, some way to understand this tragedy.

Every tragedy reminds us that we live in a world in which we’re not in control. So, when tragedy strikes - the Russian attack on the people of Ukraine, a volcanic eruption in New Zealand, floods in Queensland and New South Wales, fires in Western Australia, cancer, car accidents, crimes, corruption – we look for an explanation, an answer, some way to make sense of the event. If we can just find a rationale for the suffering of others – their sins, choices, mistakes – we feel a bit safer and more in control by knowing that we’re not like that. We would never attack anyone, would we? We would never build or buy a house in a flood zone, would we? We’re different. We reassure ourselves with the knowledge, whether it’s true or not, that we’ve not made the same mistakes. We’ve made better choices. We’ve not committed those same sins.

I believe we do this not because we’re nasty, but because we’re scared. We know that we’re vulnerable to the changes and eruptions of life. We’re not in control. So, we tend to rationalise things by either ascribing retribution and punishment to God, blaming the victims, or claiming to be victims of injustice ourselves. This is why we hear rubbish like: “Covid-19 was sent to cleanse the world of its immorality.” Then there’s the, “Why do people live where there’re floods, droughts, cyclones, tornadoes, fires, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, snow blizzards, avalanches, mud slides, deadly snakes, sharks, lions, crocodiles?” – you get the picture. And when I delivered the Harvest Thanksgiving offerings to the Sem last Sunday, I went for a wander and a sticky-beak around the old stomping ground. Something I saw, both angered and disturbed me. Someone who opposes Covid-19 vaccination had printed

two posters and stuck them to the walls of Hebart Hall. The tone was both sarcastic and menacing – “NO JEWS. NO BLACKS. NO UNVACCINATED PEOPLE. YOU’RE NOT WELCOME. *Where love comes to life.*” This is language deeply rooted in fear and lies, not love and truth.

This is exactly what those who come to Jesus in today’s gospel are doing. They tell Jesus about some Galileans who were murdered by Pontius Pilate while they offered their sacrifices to God. Jesus detects a distorted cause and effect implication in their thinking. Their tone obviously betrays their attitude, which goes something like this: “Those Galileans must have been sinners, they must have done something to deserve this; something we haven’t done.” Jesus denies their logic. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you.... 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? No, I tell you.”

“No, I tell you; but unless *you* repent, you will all perish just as they did”, Jesus says.

These words sound just like the distorted cause and effect view that Jesus has just called out. They sound like a threat from a demanding landowner, “Produce fruit or be cut down.” But that’s not who God is and that’s not how God deals with God’s people. God doesn’t cut down life. Rather, God’s desire and love for life knows no limits as we hear from Isaiah: ‘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. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live’ [55:1-3]. God gives, sustains, and grows life. Likewise, Jesus’ call to repentance, are the words of a compassionate and caring gardener who seeks to nourish life, who is willing to roll up his sleeves, get down on his hands and knees, dig around in the dirt of our life, water, even spread a little manure, and then trust that fruit will grow. This gardener sees possibilities for life that we often can’t see in our own lives.

Another thing I believe is important to clarify is this: If the absence of fruit doesn't cause God's vengeance, then neither does the presence of fruit cause God to reward. Even being sinless won't save us from suffering and tragedy. Jesus' own life and death bear testimony to that. Fruit for this gardener isn't a payment, a transaction, or a ransom for being permitted to live another day. It's rather, the result of mutual love, a relationship, and presence. Fruit is the evidence of life. It's crucial to remember that God's love isn't transactional love. God's love is unconditional. The only price tag on God's love is grace.

If you hear urgency and necessity in Jesus' call to repentance, then your heart, head, and hearing are correctly attuned. Jesus speaks this way, not because God is vindictive, but because life is short, precious, and sacred. It's not because God is bent on revenge, but because God is unconditional love. Jesus doesn't seem to be as concerned about why people die as much as why people refuse to live. Everyone dies but not all people truly live. Too often and too easily we perish even before we die – through our fear, prejudices, judgements and condemnations, the need for control, the victimisation of others, ourselves, and our impoverishment of God.

Saints, I urge you to hear Jesus' call to repentance as his invitation to choose life. Live or perish. The reality is that towers fall, calamities strike, diseases kill, accidents happen, and the Pontius Pilates of this world seek to destroy life. So, we must decide where we place our trust – in the mechanics of a distorted cause and effect view of what happens in the world and our lives; or, in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God who has observed our misery, heard our cry, and come to deliver us from bondage and slavery and take us into the Promised Land. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.