

3rd Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 20, 2022
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Luke 13:1-9

“The Wait and See Approach”

We record several news broadcasts in our house – from the Today Show in the morning, to the BBC World New Hour, to the 6:00 local evening news broadcast on WDSU. And this past week has just been one of those weeks where I find myself settling in to watch a broadcast and I have to keep the remote handy to fast forward through the parts I just find too sad or tragic or stressful. I want to learn about the latest in the war in Ukraine, but as soon as they start showing footage of bombed out maternity hospitals and confused and displaced children asking when they can go home, I’m out! It’s gotten to where I’m watching the weather, the latest March Madness upsets, and where I can score great deals on the latest spring fashions.

In turning to our scripture reading today, the crowd with Jesus must have been having a similarly tiresome week, as they confront him with the latest piece of news of Roman atrocities – this time Pilate slaughtering Galileans while presenting their sacrifices and worshipping God. And well, Jesus doesn’t give the answers I, at least, expect of him. In this moment I want an answer that is empathic, compassionate, loving and grace-filled. One that answers once and for all that ever-troublesome problem of “why do bad things happen, particularly why do bad things happen to good people?” But instead we get a response that sounds more like something John the Baptist or a revivalist preacher might say – “Repent! Or Perish!”

Much to my dismay Jesus does not give us any easy answers as he emphatically rejects the notion that these tragic events are a result of God’s judgement or punishment. Now it was not

an uncommon belief in 1st century Judaism that tragedy and unfortunate circumstances were the result of sin - either an individual's sin or their ancestors. But Jesus rejects simplistic answers, quick fixes, and shallow theological thinking that stymies our spiritual growth and our response to the most complex, deep, and troubling questions of our humanity. The truth is that there are just some things that we aren't fully going to understand – and that is at times a deeply unsatisfying thing to admit, but there is a mystery that we must lean into, knowing God is in that mystery working for the healing and reconciliation of the world. We can be assured that God has nothing to do with making these bad things happen – these things are not “of God.” But God is certainly not absent from them.

Jesus tell us to not worry so much about the unknowable and the uncontrollable, but instead focus on what we can know, what we can control – our own hearts and lives. It's easy for us to look on this passage and be judgmental of the 1st century crowd and their beliefs in a punitive and unfeeling God. But deep down we do still believe that everything in life is earned – both the good things and the bad things. Jesus reminds us in no uncertain terms that in fact all of us are sinners and apart from God are destined for death and destruction, and making these judgement calls are often easier than looking inward at our precarious position in life and our responsibilities to respond to the suffering around us. This sense of control we try to yield only isolates us from suffering and heartbreak. It takes us further away from the heart of God and further away from our common humanity.

The word, “repent” that Jesus uses is “*metanoia*,” and it has several meanings – much more than the contrition and penitence that we often associate with this word. A fuller understanding of the word would be more like the changing of hearts and lives. Repentance is a

continual act in our relationship with God. It is a reorientation of our hearts and lives to God, God's kingdom, God's vision of the world and ourselves.

In his parable of the fig tree Jesus demonstrates what it is to face this mystery of the unknowable, to be open to the possibilities of a future that we do not control. Instead of numbing ourselves or becoming paralyzed at prospect of dealing with a whole world of pain and suffering, Jesus simplifies things, allowing us to understand what are our responsibilities and what is ours to tend to. Jesus is the gardener, helping us to remove that soil which does not nourish, does not serve us in our spiritual lives, and then adds to our lives the necessary nutrients to sustain us our flourishing and the bearing of fruit. Fruits of a greater understandings of ourselves, of God, and of the world. Fruits of service and purpose as we stop worrying the big WHY of suffering and get down to the what is my response?

Author and speaker Glennon Doyle puts it this way in her book *Untamed*¹ -

“Again and again women ask me, “How do I find my purpose? How do I find my people?” My best advice: When heartbreak rings, answer the door...

It's like we really believe that our hearts were meant to be kept hidden away, bubble-wrapped, and under lockdown. As though the point of life is to *not be moved*. That's not the point. When we let ourselves be moved, we discover what moves us. Heartbreak is not something to be avoided; it's something to pursue. Heartbreak is one of the greatest clues of our lives.

The magic of heartbreak is that each person's doorbell rings in response to something specific. What rings your bell? Is it racial injustice? Bullying? Animal cruelty?

¹ Doyle, Glennon. *Untamed*. Pg. 268-269.

Hunger? War? The environment? Kids with cancer? What is it that affects you so deeply that whenever you encounter it, you feel the need to look away? Look there. Where is the pain in the world that you just cannot stand? Stand there. The thing that breaks your heart is the very thing you were born to help heal. Every world changer's work begins with a broken heart.

I met a group of women in Iowa who'd each lost a baby to stillbirth or early infant death. They formed a sisterhood, and together, through education and other kinds of support, they've contributed to lowering the stillbirth rate in their state so significantly that doctors are scratching their heads in disbelief and gratitude. Instead of withdrawing or disconnecting from their suffering, they ran straight toward it. Their shared pain became their bond and their fuel. Now, together, they are saving others from the very heartbreak that brought them together."

We cannot turn away from the suffering of the world. We must do as Jesus says, and turn towards it as we turn towards God. Additionally, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry reminds us that in doing this work of repentance, "We plant the seeds that will one day grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that need future development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. Being freed from managing the results of our actions enables us to do something, and do it well."²

I don't know why was bombs are being dropped on homes, schools, shelters, and hospitals in Ukraine. I don't know why over 3 million refugees from Ukraine are now displaced

² Curry, Michael B. "Luke 13:1-9 Commentary, 3rd Sunday in Lent." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 2*.

from their homes. What I do know is that they are no more sinners than I am, and they are no less loved by God. What I do know is that their suffering breaks my heart and I am called to stay in it, as I repent, attune my broken heart to God's heart, where God invites each of us to join her in the vineyard, to wait and see what happens next, wait and see God at work.