

March 24, 2019 – 3rd Sunday in Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 13:1-9

The Sign

I thought about bringing in a prop for the sermon today—props are often a help and a hit during the children’s sermon, so I thought about having one for the pulpit sermon today, a sign with words in all caps: “Repent or perish!” It’s not nearly as fun as handing out figs, but just as biblical. Before the parable of the fig tree, Jesus says, “Repent or perish!” The gospel is supposed to be good news, but this sounds harsh; angry, not appetizing.

As if that weren’t enough, there’s also the context in which Jesus says it, a context in which people are trying to make sense of something awful, a recent, a tragic event. People tell Jesus about it, this thing that happened. We don’t hear what they say directly and we don’t get a lot of detail, just enough to make you shudder. Isn’t that often how it is? When you hear about something tragic that’s happened you often don’t get all the specifics, just enough to punch you in the gut. What has happened in this case is that some people—people not too different from those talking about it—have died, been killed, by a person in power. The government, which is supposed to be protecting people, is killing people. This still happens, today. And not just that, this was not just a political brutality, it was an act of violence against a people’s religious identity, intended to assault and insult their core beliefs, something done not just to destroy, but to desecrate. This also still happens today. People are still slaughtered in synagogues, in mosques, in churches. This is what the people in today’s gospel reading want to tell Jesus—and not just in case he hasn’t heard about it. They’re not just sharing info, they’re asking Jesus a question, “How do we make sense of this?”

Jesus refuses to make sense of it. Jesus refutes the sense that so many make of it when horrible things happen, that “sense” being that the victim somehow deserved it. Jesus refutes that, absolutely. “Do you think this terrible thing happened to them, because they were especially terrible people?” Jesus asks. “No,” he replies, immediately, decisively, answering his own question without hesitation, “No.” Jesus refuses the tidy moral math people often turn to in difficult times, that math that says that “bad things happen to bad people, by bad people.” And then Jesus ups the ante, describing a tragedy that can’t be pinned on one person with evil intent. Jesus says, “And that disaster with the tower, when a building fell on people and killed them, do you think that terrible thing happened to them, because they were especially terrible people?” “No,” Jesus says, again answering his own question. “No. Suffering is not doled out according to the bad a person has done,” Jesus says. We know this, but it bears repeating, again, and especially when we are in the midst of suffering. Even when we know better, pain and grief can drive us to ask, “Did I do something to deserve this?” “No,” Jesus says, “No,” angry that anyone would even suggest it. “No, that’s not how it works.”

We might wish Jesus would then explain how it does work. He doesn’t. Instead he says “Repent or perish.” Given the context, it sounds harsh. And then he goes on to tell a story, which might be used for a food-based children’s sermon but which actually also sounds somewhat harsh, what with its repeated, “Cut it down!”

I want to take a closer look at that story, that parable, but a little word study concerning the word “repent” is needed first. “Repent” is a good word, a good word especially for this time of year, a good Lenten word, but is often misunderstood, or understood in much too limited a

way. To repent, many think, is to feel bad about something bad that you did. To repent is to feel regret, or remorse. You better feel that, or that's it for you; repent or perish. Now I am not dismissing or discounting the importance of regret or remorse. These are necessary emotions, in all too short supply—but feeling them does not mean you have repented. In Greek, the original language of the New Testament, the word translated repent is *metanoia*, *meta* meaning “after” or “beyond” and *noia* meaning “to perceive, to think, to know.” To repent is to have an “after perception” or to “think beyond.” To repent is to have another perspective, beyond where one was before. To repent doesn't mean you just feel bad, to repent means you understand things differently, and so do things differently. To repent means you're not the same as you were before.

This is where the fig tree comes in, because a fig tree does not have feelings, but is given a chance to repent. When we first meet the fig tree, it actually isn't much of a fig tree; it's just bare branches. Perhaps we do have a prop for today's sermon after all, over here by the baptismal font. You can look at that and think of the fig tree in this parable, a fig tree which might have perished, but for the gardener who said, “Let it go for another year.” And not just that, the gardener also said, “I'll give it extra care, I'll aerate the soil around it and add nutrients.” Will this help the fig tree see things differently? No. Fig trees don't have eyes. But it might help the fig tree do things differently, and those different things will be seen. They'll be seen because instead of bare branches this fig tree might bear fruit.

We might recall something said way back at the beginning of Luke's gospel, a phrase that connects the two parts of today's gospel, a phrase John the Baptist says, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” John the Baptist gave that admonishment, along with mention of an axe: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Hearing this we may feel alarmed all over again. What a harsh warning, what a harsh illustration! Repent or perish! Repent or be cut down! Remember, it's a fig tree. Bearing figs is what it's designed to do. It's in its DNA. It's being asked to be what it's been created to be. Though it was off to a slow start, it's given a not insignificant amount of additional time to be what it is, and additional resources, to surround and support it, and attention and help from an expert, a gardener. And we also must not forget the state of the fig tree before the admonishment. Remember how it was, how it looked? It was nothing but bare branches. Was it really living, then? Was it not already perishing?

All of this, of course, is an apt metaphor for where we find ourselves, this Lenten season, and any season in which we are in the wilderness, bewildered, beset by suffering and uncertain how to make sense of it. Jesus does not explain the senselessness, but he does warn us, with vehemence, against ways we sometimes do. And he urges us, passionately: take hold of the life we have, be what we are created to be.

We are not given an explanation for suffering, not here, but we are given a God who also suffers, a God who will be desecrated, crushed by the powers that be and nailed to a tree. It was a barren looking tree, the cross, a barren-looking tree that would become the sign of God's death defeating love for us. After he died, after he was raised, the one who hung upon the tree would be mistaken for a gardener, another gospel tells us. It was early on Easter morning, and Mary Magdalene was so distraught by recent, tragic events that she mistook the risen Jesus for a gardener. In light of today's parable, Mary made no mistake, she accurately identified Jesus as the gardener, the one who makes it possible for our barren branches to be filled with fruit. Repent, have a perspective beyond, see things differently, do things differently, repent, and live.