



## Liturgical Day: The Third Sunday in Lent

Date: March 11, 2007

Title: Fertilized

The story is told of the World War II soldier who is about to enter battle. He is struck with a deep and terrifying fear, and talks to his Sergeant about it. The Sergeant advises him not to worry: "If a bullet has your name on it, it will get you. If not, it won't." The soldier (who is smarter than the Sergeant counseling him) replies: "It isn't the bullet with my name on it that scares me. It is all those other bullets addressed, *To Whom It May Concern.*" So it is with much of the suffering in our world. It is undeserved, that is in the sense of being direct retribution for action. Suffering in this world is mostly addressed, "To Whom It May Concern."<sup>1</sup>

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 55:1-9

PSALM

PSALM 63:1-8

SECOND LESSON

1ST CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 13:1-9

PRAYER OF THE DAY

ETERNAL LORD, YOUR  
KINGDOM HAS BROKEN INTO  
OUR TROUBLED WORLD  
THROUGH THE LIFE, DEATH,  
AND RESURRECTION OF YOUR  
SON. HELP US TO HEAR  
YOUR WORD AND OBEY IT,  
SO THAT WE BECOME  
INSTRUMENTS OF YOUR  
REDEEMING LOVE;  
THROUGH YOUR SON,  
JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD,  
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS  
WITH YOU AND THE HOLY  
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND  
FOREVER. AMEN.

Jesus' listeners ask him about suffering. And more specifically, they ask him about undeserved suffering. There were some worshippers at the Temple, making the appropriate sacrifices, doing their best to stay right with God. We don't know much more about the story than this: that while they were offering their sacrifices, Pilate's soldiers burst into the temple, and killed them right there at the altar. As they lay dying on the floor, their blood ran into the blood of the animals they had just sacrificed. It was a horrible story – a story that rocked faithful believers to the core. How could that happen? How could Pilate be so callous? Why did God not stop that from happening? Or was it God's will? Were they killed, because God determined they deserved it, and sent soldiers to do them in?

Jesus' listeners are concerned about right and wrong, and the injustice of it all. I'm sure they hope this teacher from Nazareth, wise beyond his years, can help them to put it all in perspective and better understand it. But Jesus has little time for that concern. He very quickly changes the topic. It is awful, how they died. And there are many awful deaths in this world – for instance: those Judeans who died when the tower of Siloam fell in Jerusalem. Like Jesus' listeners, scholars, philosophers and theologians have debated for years whether or not the calamities of this life are God's way of punishing people. Jesus puts that all to rest with one word. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

"No," Jesus says: "These tragic deaths are not the work of God. And perhaps even more importantly: speculation about the origin of evil, and the impact that pain and brokenness have in this world is not at the center of what I am all about. I am far more concerned about repentance. I am far more concerned about transformed lives. I am far more concerned that you are touched, deep inside of you, by my ministry, in such a way that your life is turned around in a new direction. That's what this faith is all about. That's what it means to be in a living and growing relationship with God. And unless that happens for you, you will all be destroyed."

Not a lot of middle ground in his words this weekend, is there? Jesus teaches his listeners that as horrible as these tragic deaths seem, it would be equally horrible if they should hear what he had to say, but it never touches their hearts; it never turns their lives around; it never turns their lives back to God. He had come to make a difference. He had come to work change in them. And the day will come when one question is asked: "Did Jesus make a difference in your life, or not?"

To emphasize his point, he tells them a parable about a fig tree. This is a tree, planted in a vineyard, with the intent that the owner of the vineyard would harvest figs from the tree. But the tree didn't perform. Now it wasn't that the tree did anything bad. The problem is that the tree didn't do anything. It just sat there. It drew up all the

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nutrition it wanted from the earth of that vineyard, but it never even began to fulfill the purpose for which it had been planted. And that made all the difference to the owner of the vineyard. "Cut it down. Get rid of it. Don't let it waste my time and energy any longer."

The word is clear. We, like the fig tree, are created for a purpose. We are intended to grow in faith. We are intended to witness with our words and our actions. We are intended to produce good fruit. And if we aren't, we are wasting God's energy – using up the resources of the church's ministry for no good reason. What would it be like if we adopted this text as a guide for our life together? Can you imagine that? I can just see it: each January, our Mission Team could hold meetings with each of our members and asks one simple question: "Are you just warming a seat in our worship center, or are you here to be stretched and challenged and strengthened to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ?"

The life Jesus is describing is, of course, a life of repentance. Repentance is what Jesus commands in today's Gospel, and repentance is at the heart of our Lenten journey. Now repentance is far more than asking forgiveness. Repentance is a powerful word – a Greek word – that more literally translated means: having one's mind completely transformed. Lent is a season that invites us into the kind of reflection and practice that helps to move repentance closer to the center of who we are. Lent is a time of contemplating the life God has called us to live and the grace God has showered upon our lives. Lent is a time of reflecting on how poorly we respond to that call and that grace. Lent is a time of considering how we might better position ourselves to be touched by the Holy Spirit, and transformed by the power of the Gospel – turned in an entirely new direction – turned back towards God, and God's grace.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that repentance is not what we have to do so God will take us back. It is what going back to God looks like. I like that definition. Repentance is acknowledging our need for God's power. Repentance is making room in our lives for the Holy Spirit. Repentance is experiencing the grace of God that has the capacity to transform us into people we have never been before – people we never imagined ourselves able to be.

Remember the parable of the fig tree – how the owner was ready to destroy it because it wasn't bearing fruit. But that's not how the story ends. Instead, the gardener is able to argue for one more year – for one more chance. Let's dig around it, and spread some manure on it, and see what another year will bring. Perhaps with a bit more encouragement, it will bear the fruit it is intended to bear.

I like that as a metaphor for the church: the church's main purpose is found in providing a second chance. The church's main purpose is in helping each of us grow in our ability to be transformed by God's grace, to know God's will, and to live in a way that produces the fruits of faith – to live in a way that is pleasing to God, and a witness to the world. That, in a nutshell, is what it means to live as a disciple. That, in a nutshell, is what this Gospel lesson asks of us. To remember that our God is one who is always ready to give it another year. Our God is one who delights in making it possible for that one more chance to have our hearts touched, our lives transformed, and our living renewed.

Will you join me in praying that this might happen?

*Gracious God, in this season of Lent, we are mindful of the many ways that we fall short of your call to faithfulness. Help us to understand and be more aware of our sin. Turn our hearts back to you. Grant us the presence of your Holy Spirit, that we might be transformed in spirit and mind, and renewed for lives of discipleship. We thank you for the gift of Christ, and pray that you might empower us to live as your faithful people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 18, 2007)

English Text: <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." <sup>6</sup> Then 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. <sup>7</sup> So 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?' <sup>8</sup> He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" <sup>iii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>1</sup> Παρήσαν δέ τινες ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ καιρῷ ἀπαγγέλλοντες αὐτῷ περὶ τῶν Γαλιλαίων ὧν τὸ αἷμα Πιλάτος ἐμίξεν μετὰ τῶν θουσιῶν αὐτῶν. <sup>2</sup> καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· δοκεῖτε ὅτι οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι οὗτοι ἀμαρτωλοὶ παρὰ πάντας τοὺς Γαλιλαίους ἐγένοντο, ὅτι ταῦτα πεπόνθασιν; <sup>3</sup> οὐχί, λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήτε πάντες ὁμοίως ἀπολείσθε. <sup>4</sup> ἢ ἐκεῖνοι οἱ δεκαοκτὼ ἐφ' οὓς ἔπεσεν ὁ πύργος ἐν τῷ Σιλωὰμ καὶ ἀπέκτεινεν αὐτούς, δοκεῖτε ὅτι αὐτοὶ ὀφειλέται ἐγένοντο παρὰ πάντας τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς κατοικοῦντας Ἱερουσαλήμ; <sup>5</sup> οὐχί, λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήτε πάντες ὡσαύτως ἀπολείσθε. <sup>6</sup> Ἐλεγεν δὲ ταύτην τὴν παραβολὴν· συκὴν εἶχεν τις πεφυτευμένην ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἦλθεν ζητῶν καρπὸν ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ οὐχ εὗρεν. <sup>7</sup> εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τὸν ἀμπελουργόν· ἴδου τρία ἔτη ἀφ' οὗ ἔρχομαι ζητῶν καρπὸν ἐν τῇ συκῇ ταύτῃ καὶ οὐχ εὗρισκω. ἔκκοψον [οὖν] αὐτήν, ἵνα τί καὶ τὴν γῆν καταργεῖ; <sup>8</sup> ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς λέγει αὐτῷ· κύριε, ἄφες αὐτὴν καὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἔτος, ἕως ὅτου σκάψω περὶ αὐτὴν καὶ βάλω κόπρια, <sup>9</sup> κὰν μὲν ποιήσῃ καρπὸν εἰς τὸ μέλλον· εἰ δὲ μή γε, ἐκκόψεις αὐτήν. <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>i</sup> From Pastor Karl F. Redelsheimer, Zion Lutheran Church in Belvidere, Illinois – comment offered in the online discussion "Gospel Notes for Next Sunday" (moderated by Lutheran Pastor Brian Stoffregen) on March 11, 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> Link to: [http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/year\\_c.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/year_c.html) for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

<sup>iii</sup> St. Luke 13:1-9, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iv</sup> St. Luke 13:1-9, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).