

Sermon: Luke 13.1-9

Delivered Sunday March 24th, The Third Sunday in Lent. Lessons: Isaiah 55.1-9; Psalm 63.1-8; 1 Corinthians 10.1-13; Gospel of Luke 13.1-9

I remember one time in my undergraduate days when I was a summer student working in warehouses driving a forklift around, dreaming of a more exciting and fulfilling future, that there was this really awful, generic country and/or western song playing on the radio talking about how crummy life is when one of my line mates drove up beside me in his forklift and he said to me: “hey college boy!” And apparently it didn’t seem to matter to him that I was attending university, but he said: hey college boy, do you know what happens when you play a country music album backwards?”

And I looked at him, and I said: “I have no idea? What happens when you play a country music album backwards?” And then my friend said: “well, the dog ain’t dead no more, and my pick up truck ain’t busted up no more, and the woman I love has come back to love me!”

Now believe it or not, I’ll actually do love country music! Country western music is after all, that great genre of music of the blue collar working class, that excels at naming how crummy and tough and so often how unfair life can be. Where often its songs are about loss and being done wrong like when you lose your job through no fault of your own or some no good person cheats on you. I grew up with songs like Meryl Haggard’s Working Man’s Blues, and Hank Williams “I’ll never get out of this world alive” That song by Hank Williams in particular tells the story of a man with just plain bad luck, with lyrics such as: My fishin’ pole’s broke the creek is full of sand / My woman run away with another man / No matter how I struggle and strive / I’ll never get

out of this world alive.

You know I actually think part of the genius of Hank Williams songwriting is that I think we can all relate to what that song's saying largely because mortality is something that each of us have to eventually come to grips with. At the beginning of our season in Lent, on Ash Wednesday, our foreheads were marked with ashes that remind each of us: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Because unless you're planning to conveniently shuffle off this mortal coil like the prophet Elijah did in a flaming chariot that entered into heaven, none of us is getting out of this world alive. You are mortal, you are finite, and life as our daily news reminds us is fragile. Because no matter how much we struggle and strive, none of us can ultimately protect and insulate ourselves from every danger that life can and will throw at us: from disease, traffic accidents, random violence, or other sudden illnesses. Life can at times, be very capricious, where suddenly it can all end, like that! (snap fingers) And then we can wonder, well where's God in all this?

And this, by the way is no new concern, but it's been around for a long time... You'll notice, for instance, in our gospel lesson for today, that there's a bunch of concerned people who go up to Jesus and ask him about this awful massacre that recently took place, where apparently Pilate killed a bunch of Galileans, and then he mixed or mingled their spilled blood with the blood of animals sacrificed in the temple. -A particularly gruesome and horrible, in fact blasphemous way to go, and you notice that the people's question to Jesus was: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

You see what's behind their question is this old theological understanding about how God ticks. That is, there was this popular understanding that when it comes to God's justice, or what in theology, is called the subject of theodicy, that good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people.

Because you see, they were working with the understanding that if God is responsible for everything that happens, and God is a just God, then calamities must only be the result of human sinfulness. That if something bad happens to you, then it can only mean you've been bad somewhere. From Deuteronomy 30, verse 15, their own torah reads:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God ...then you shall live and become prosperous....But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray...I declare to you today that you shall perish, you shall not live long [for] I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

So just imagine if you will, for a second, what it would be like if you actually believed that everything that bad happened to you, was because you deserved it. That because God was mad at you and was punishing you for it. You can imagine the kind of deadly guilt that they must have been living with. This sense that whenever calamity fell upon you, you were always to blame for it because the way they understood God necessitated them to understand that because God can only be just, it must mean you're always getting your just desserts.

But then, Jesus challenges these concerned people by saying to them that NO, this is not how God rolls, this is not how God ticks. Those people Pilate killed were not any different or worse off than you, and then Jesus goes on to tell them another story

about a time when a tower came suddenly crashing down and killed 18 people and Jesus tells them, that neither were those 18 people any worse off than you. Because what Jesus was trying to point out to them, is pretty much the big theological question that all of us seem to wonder at different points in our lives: is why do bad things happen to good people? And I'm afraid the best answer I can share with you in my ministry right now is that ultimately we don't know. In our first lesson, we heard the prophet Isaiah remind his people that ultimately God's thoughts are not your thoughts, nor God's ways, our ways...For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

What I want you to know is that when someone you love gets cancer, it's so deeply tragic, and I'm sorry for what has happened to you, but what Jesus wants you to know and for all of us to know is that that person didn't get cancer, because they were bad. Or when some of us wonder, well why did all those people in New Zealand in the mosques have to get shot, it wasn't because they were bad either. And as much as to why do these things happen, we just don't know, but what Jesus wants us to be really clear about is that God doesn't act this way, because in fact, just as we say during our confession and absolution, that indeed God is steadfast in love, and infinite in mercy. And welcomes sinners to his table. From our first reading again, Isaiah reminds us to: Seek the Lord while he may be found...that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Last week, we heard, Jesus himself say that God is like a hen, who wishes always to gather up her chicks under her wings. Jesus is convinced that our God is an

incredible God of love; a God who keeps reaching out to us, and a God who has blessed us in his image with free will, a gift which surely God never transgresses.

If you ask me, that's the thing about God, free will, and creation. While it may be true that God is responsible for gravity, but if you're standing on the edge of a cliff and you decide to jump off, you do not blame God for having decided to have created gravity and that gravity is always trying to keep us grounded...That's just what we know at this time about physics and that if you continue to make bad decisions in your life, well don't be surprised if eventually, one day they might come back to bite you.

And in our gospel story this day, Jesus drives home his point by telling a parable about a man who wanted to cut down a fig tree that wasn't producing fruit, but the gardener who was looking after the man, pleads with him, to give it another shot, to give it another year and see if maybe we can turn the fortunes of this fig tree around.

And you see, that's the catch. God has given us this thing called free will, and for good reason, because just as much as Jesus was challenging the conventional prevailing wisdom that God doesn't in fact cause bad things only to happen to bad people, but Jesus reminds the people: "but no I tell you; unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

What Jesus is pointing to is that as much as there is mercy to be found in God, there is also a warning of the urgency to repent because if you don't, don't be surprised if not everything works out for you in the end, because in fact, Jesus wants his hearers to know is that indeed life here is finite. That in deed, as Jesus says in the example of the fig tree, that it can be given a reprieve for a while, to see if it can turn its fortunes around, but its opportunities are not unlimited.

That there is an urgency for the need to repent, that is to literally turn around and change your ways or change your mind, because in fact, it's not all good, that not everything we do is pleasing to God, and while I do believe there is no limit to God's mercy, and that God is always seeking to be in relationship with us, but because for the simple fact, that each of us is mortal, that each of us is finite, and that indeed there will come a time in each of our lives when we will not always have the opportunity to turn back to God or to each other in relationship for the simple reason that each of us is going to die.

Now this might sound harsh, especially for those preachers and congregations that believe God is all exclusively and only about love and mercy and rainbows and lollipops, but I believe in fact, that we can not delude ourselves into thinking that we can just keep messing up our lives infinitely, because in fact, there does indeed come a point of no return.

I mean you look at the whole question of climate change and extreme weather for instance. Now as much as there still is some legitimate debate regarding whether or not, every few hundreds of years, the earth does naturally go into warmer and cooler periods and cycles of climate change, the science is pretty reliable that humans are willy nilly contributing to climate change by the decisions we make to continue burning fossil fuels for instance, and that even if we are only responsible for changing the climate by 2 or 3 degrees, that still has a tremendous contributing effect to producing droughts and flooding and contributing to more extreme temperatures which affect the whole ecosystem. For, Eventually, as our scientists warn us, is that we will come to a

period of time where there is no going back and the harm we are doing to the planet is not reparable.

Or even in your personal lives, where we have fallen short, where maybe we got into a fight with someone we once loved, where we said things we shouldn't have, or maybe where we're no longer speaking to each other, and we just can't or won't forgive each other, we know what it's like to walk around with this pain, and how much we would love to give it up, because we don't want to carry it around with us for the rest of our lives, this hurt, this damage, these feelings that we feel when we have sinned, when we have hurt others.

And yet God in his mercy, if there is any hope in the hurt that our sins have caused us and the world is the good news that Jesus delivers to those who have ears to listen. The consolation of Jesus' message to all those who heard him speak this parable of the fig tree is that indeed our God is a loving God; that he's not the boogey man some of us have made him out to be who's just waiting to club us over the head because we have sinned. But the reality is, God wants to take those crumbly and country western music soundtracks of our lives, and like my friend said to me all those year ago, is start playing that album in a different direction; a direction that turns back to him. Where the dog that was gone in our lives can be given new flesh to its bone, as in the prophesy of Ezekiel, and where what's was broken, such as a bad relationship, can be healed, and what was dead, can be given new life, for just as the one thief who hung on the cross with Jesus looked over to him and cried out: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom, Jesus replies: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Which is why during this season in Lent, we as the Church have been given a gift; a gift to reflect on how we are living our lives, where we can ask ourselves individually and as the Church, are we moving away or towards God's loving embrace? And if we are moving towards God's love, this is good, but if you think you are not, than perhaps may I invite you to consider a little closer what changes you may need to make; that maybe there is someone or maybe just yourself you need to forgive; to say you're sorry to; to make amends with, to set things right. And if you're not too sure, that maybe you need to pray over it some more, and maybe in your praying you may find yourself reaching out to talk to someone, perhaps even to a priest, and I'd be more than happy to listen. Because for me, the lesson of the fig tree is a challenge to live each day as a gift from God. And to live each day in such a way that you will have no fear of giving an account for how you have used God's gift. A gift that God wants you to enjoy, but to enjoy responsibly. Amen.