



## Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Exodus 3:1-15](#)

[1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#)

[Luke 13:1-9](#)

For this third Sunday in Lent, the scriptures are pretty intense! I will set aside the reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians – Paul goes in a very different direction than Jesus does in Luke, where we will be focusing our attention. The reading from Exodus about the calling of Moses is an amazing text, full and rich in itself, and we will touch on it a bit. But Jesus' words we hear today are challenging and deserve our attention.

Today's Gospel passage from Luke 13 is rough. It puts us right in the path of hot discussion of terrible current events of Jesus' time – a time which was not mythic but was in the midst of real, living history. And it faces us with some hard words of Jesus. Jesus has some hard things to say – some hard truths for us to hear.

But his words, as he faces the realities of the world with bold truth and open honesty, are words that free us from the grips of current events and from the bizarre ways we twist and turn in order to make sense of them.

Current events are always with us, on our minds, as human beings. We cannot escape the world, and the events of the world around us are part of our life. More and more and more, current events are constantly with us – just a click or two away on our phones or pads or computers, rattling constantly on the radio or television. And over those same sources come a cacophony of voices trying to interpret and judge and make sense of them, from various twists and turns in perspective. They are grasping at straws, trying to gain some control over the chaos and cruelty that can happen in our world.

There are terrible, horrifying, gruesome things that happen.

And people want to understand why. Because terrible, horrifying, gruesome events tear up our imaginations and rip through our beliefs about how the world should function.

We want things to happen for a reason. Part of why we want this is because we want closure and we want to contain the horror and terror and sorrow. We want trauma and grief to be contained. If we can come up with or create a reason for why things like this happen, then we will be able to put it aside. Or so we tell ourselves.

First, though, it doesn't work. We cannot rid ourselves and the world of terrible events by thinking up reasons and rationales for them happening, to make them fade away. Tragic and traumatic events linger and lurk in our memories.

Second, these kinds of events defy any simple explanation, and bringing God into the mix does not simplify our understanding. Simply put, these kinds of events are not because God wanted them to happen. They are not a matter of some kind of cosmic justice. Galileans don't die at the hands of the Empire because God wants it or commands it to happen. A tower doesn't fall on and kill people because God wants it or commands it to happen. Planes are not flown into twin towers, bombs are not launched into maternity hospitals, people are not killed by police or federal agent SWAT teams or angry gangs of thugs, because God wants these things to happen or makes them happen as a form of judgment or way of teaching us all something. Tragic or traumatic things don't happen to some people (including many of us) because we are secretly terrible sinners in the crosshairs of God's judgment.

But this way of thinking, that God or the fates or karma is the reason that terrible things happen – this way of thinking is so common for people. So, the crowd is all a-buzz about the awful killings of the Galileans by

Pilate's secretly armed soldiers, and by the collapse of a tower that snuffed out lives. They are horrified – and they want an explanation. And so they begin thinking that maybe these people were responsible in some way for their own deaths – by some choices they made or sins they committed or by the types of people they had become. We find this way of thinking among the disciples themselves, in the Gospel of John, when they met the man born blind from birth. “Whose sin was this?” they wondered, and debated about whether the man was blind because of his own sin or because of his parents' sin. And this way of seeking to blame the victim was actually painting a picture of a God who is always looking to punish, who will make terrible consequences happen for sins and errors that barely have any connection to the consequences themselves.

Jesus isn't having any of this kind of talk or thinking. Now, he certainly is aware of the current events. Jesus was walking and living and interacting in the very real world around him.

So, let's paint the picture of the current-event world in Jesus' time in this moment. You may from time to time wonder why I talk about Empire and Dictators and Mob Thinking in biblical times. I talk about them because they were real – and they have their parallels to life today. So, today I want to read you directly from the Works of Josephus, a historian from the first century A.D. who knew this world of Jesus' time very well. He has some things to say about Pilate and Galileans that help us see the realities of the time much more clearly. These are political and cultural realities on everyone's mind, because they have just happened recently.

*BUT now Pilate, the procurator of Judea, removed the army from Cesarea to Jerusalem, to take their winter quarters there, in order to abolish the Jewish laws. So he introduced Caesar's effigies [images], which were upon the ensigns [banners], and brought them into the city; whereas our law forbids us the very making of images; on which account the former procurators were wont to make their entry into the city with such ensigns as had not those ornaments. Pilate was the first who brought those images to Jerusalem, and set them up there; which was done without the knowledge of the people, because it was done in the night time; but as soon as they knew it, they came in multitudes to Cesarea, and interceded with Pilate many days that he would remove the images; and when he would not grant their requests, because it would tend to the injury of Caesar, while yet they persevered in their request, on the sixth day he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons privately, while he came and sat upon his judgment-seat, which seat was so prepared in the open place of the city, that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them; and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them routed, and threatened that their punishment should be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. But they threw themselves upon the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed; upon which Pilate was deeply affected with their firm resolution to keep their laws inviolable, and presently commanded the images to be carried back from Jerusalem to Cesarea.*

*But Pilate undertook to bring a current of water to Jerusalem, and did it with the sacred money, and derived the origin of the stream from the distance of two hundred furlongs. However, the Jews were not pleased with what had been done about this water; and many ten thousands of the people got together, and made a clamor against him, and insisted that he should leave off that design. Some of them also used reproaches, and abused the man, as crowds of such people usually do. So he habited a great number of his soldiers in their habit, who carried daggers under their garments, and sent them to a place where they might surround them. So he bid the Jews himself go away; but they boldly casting reproaches upon him, he gave the soldiers that signal which had been beforehand agreed on; who laid upon them much greater blows than Pilate had commanded them, and equally punished those that were tumultuous, and those that were not; nor did they spare them in the least: and since the people were unarmed, and were caught*

*by men prepared for what they were about, there were a great number of them slain by this means, and others of them ran away wounded. And thus an end was put to this sedition.*

(from *The Complete Works of Josephus*, ii.xix.iii.1,2; online at [this link](#))

This is the kind of world in which Jesus is walking. Events in it are every bit as tragic, traumatic, and gruesome as they are for us in the world in which we are walking. There are cruel decisions made by people in power and authority. There are Pilates, and there are Putins, and there are Pol Pots. There are hotheaded Galileans, and angry Aryan Nation supremacists, from the countryside who enter cities to agitate and provoke against authorities. There are hotly contested issues and perspectives that lead to bloodshed.

Jesus doesn't pretend that these things are not happening. He doesn't try to distract people away from these realities. He repeats and names them. He even shows an expanded awareness, not only entering the conversation about the murdered Galileans but reminding people of another recent tragedy of a tower's collapse. Because, there are collapsing buildings and hurricanes and fires. Jesus knew the headlines and the details of the events in the world in which he lived.

But Jesus turns the whole discussion in a different direction. While people in the crowd were eager to find an explanation and place blame – in their case even blaming the Galileans themselves, wondering if some sins in their lives had led God to allow Pilate to enact such cruelty on their righteous cause – Jesus redirected their attention back to themselves and their own lives and their own ways of thinking.

*"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. 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; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."*

Well, Jesus, this seems harsh! Do you mean I'm just as sinful as them, and that something just as awful might happen to me? How could that be? And what do you mean, "unless I repent?" Repent of what? How is anything I've done as awful as what I imagine they must have done?...

...But there I go, down that same trapped path of thinking...

"Unless you repent." The better question to ask Jesus is this: Change in what way?

This phrase Jesus repeats, "Unless you repent," is critical to understand. Let's go back to the word in Greek that has been translated so often as "repent." It is the word *metanoia*, a word that literally means "transcending mind." It means "change your mind, your way of thinking, perceiving, and engaging the world – first by seeing the limits of your own thoughts now, by rising above yourself to see how you are thinking." That's the "meta" part of *metanoia*. And this is exactly what Jesus calls us to, time and time again. "Let yourself be changed. Let God bring change and transformation to your whole way of thinking and being."

In this situation, Jesus is directly addressing people's love of assigning blame and seeking some cosmic justice that puts their minds at ease and does not cost them anything personally. Jesus is telling people, "That is not how God operates! You are not talking about God." He is telling the people around him, and us, to repent of this kind of transactional thinking and obsession with a "just world theory," this way of looking for a moral accusation to make in order to reconcile the cruelty of evil or the tragedies of natural disasters.

Because, if we don't let go of this, we will perish with this same accusatory spirit and mindset. We will go to our graves trapped in this way of thinking, caught in the snares and nets of the Accuser.

And then, Jesus makes a dramatic turn as he tells this crowd a parable, a story, about a landowner, a farmhand, and a fig tree growing in the midst of a vineyard. The fig tree – something different than the dominant crop growing all around it – is not producing fruit. The landowner, the person with power and authority, has grown impatient and is ready to make a snap decision and chop it down. But the farmhand says, “Give it another chance.” Even more than that, the farmhand pledges to roll up his sleeves to care for and feed the tree, trying to help it revive and thrive. The farmhand says, “Let me work with it.”

The farmhand becomes a companion of the fig tree, rather than its condemner. The farmhand steps in as the advocate for the fig tree, rather than its accuser.

This is God’s way. While the Accuser wanders the earth like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour in cruel traps of accusation, blame, and ideas about worthiness, the Advocate sweeps through all the earth seeking to strengthen, support, and nurture those in distress and trapped in ways that bind their fruitfulness.

Here, we can return to Paul, but in a completely different passage, a beloved verse from Romans:

*Who then will condemn us? Only Christ Jesus, who died for us and was raised to life for us, and who is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us. (Romans 8:34)*

Only God incarnate, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is in a place to accuse or condemn. And Jesus came not to condemn to but plead. Not to accuse but to advocate.

“Leave him for another year. Let me work with her. I will roll up my sleeves to work with them and nurture them, to try and coax fresh growth and fruit from their lives. I am here for them.”

God wants advocates and farmhands who care and tend.

To this, God called Moses. God called Moses out of hiding and trying to put on another life and shed his old identity. God called Moses with fire that burned brightly and did not consume, and with a promise that the plight of a people enslaved had been heard, with an order that “I am sending you,” and with the power of God’s name that is the very name of existence itself – “I AM has sent me.”

This is the call of the ages. This is the calling to us in our current time and place, in the midst of our world of current events, local and global. In whatever ways we are able – as we have done as a church to send money to assist with other churches in settling an Afghani refugee family in nearby Spokane, as the Women’s Guild has pledged in sending funds to Doctors without Borders to aid Ukrainian refugees – to come to the aid of others in distress and trauma, not with a question of “Whose sin is behind this?” but with a forward looking question of “What can I do to help bring healing and strength once again?”

Are you, am I, willing to be an advocate rather than an accuser, to turn to the voice of the Advocate rather than to the voice of the Accuser?

Can we continue on even when it feels foolish or even counterproductive to keep giving and serving?

This is the Way of Love at its most honest, most vulnerable, most holy. It is the way of *metanoia*, of the changed mind and heart and way of being to which Jesus calls and invites us. It is the way that will save us. Because it is the way of our Savior who has done this all for us and continue to do this with every life.

What will you do with the fig trees in your life? What will you do with the survivors of this world’s cruelties?

Roll up your sleeves, friends. Together. Let us offer what we can to help others around us – and each other – revive and thrive. As Christ our Advocate wants for all of us.