

March 20, 2022
Third Sunday of Lent
Luke 13:1-9

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. He said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!

Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!"

And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'"

Background:

The description of the two tragic events in this Sunday's gospel are unique to Luke. They also reveal a basic understanding of people of his day, namely that bad things happen to people as punishment for their transgressions.

There are also some elements in the text that may not be immediately apparent to the reader. Pilate's deed reported here is not substantiated by history, but this is in keeping with his reputation, and therefore there is no reason to doubt that it did occur. Pilate was the representative of an occupying foreign government that was greatly disliked. Galilee was known as a center of political animosity toward Rome. Having people murdered while they were in the midst of ritual offering of sacrifice, thereby mingling their blood with the blood of the animals being sacrificed, would be disgusting and exemplify Pilate's crudity. The dilemma for Jesus was that if he remained silent when informed of Pilate's actions, he would lose credibility with the people. If he spoke out against Pilate, he would be seen as an anarchist.

The other incident mentioned in the text is that some innocent people had a portion of the temple wall collapse on them. The location would have been near the pool of Siloam. Historical records cannot authenticate this incident either. But as it is presented in the gospel, there is a presumption that the victims had received punishment for some sin. Jesus does not affirm their belief that these things happened as punishment to either set of the victims. He turns the concern of the crowd to a warning that all need to be prepared for the unexpected: Be aware of your own sinfulness, and turn toward God before some unexpected event comes upon you.

After that admonition, Jesus then tells a parable that focuses on the compassionate mercy of God. The people of Israel were often portrayed as the vineyard of Yahweh, and the crowd would likely see themselves in the parable. The fig tree that is planted within the orchard would represent the leaders of the people. Fig trees usually bear fruit ten months of the year. When planted, their fruit is not picked for three years while the tree matures. The fruit of the fourth year is given in sacrifice to God. Because this is the third year the owner has come looking for his fruit, the tree would be presumed to be in its seventh year. The tenant farmer is suggesting that the tree be given an additional year to mature, in hope that it will begin to produce figs. In this culture, everything is believed to be in limited supply, even the nutrients of the earth. To suggest that an unproductive tree be given additional care and nurturing would seem extravagant, and perhaps even wasteful, to the people of the day.

Jesus makes his point about the abundance of God's mercy with a bit of humor. The gardener who has suggested nurturing the tree with more fertilizer would be using only one kind of fertilizer, manure. The unproductive tree would be understood to represent the religious and civil elite of the day, who are not taking their responsibilities seriously but instead are living well off the fruits of the labors of others. A common person in the crowd would delight in the thought of a gardener liberally spreading manure around the base of a fig tree, imagining the religious and civil leaders being liberally covered in manure.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are your thoughts and feelings as you hear of tragic deaths of innocent people, like those being killed in the war taking place in the Ukraine?
2. How do you respond to people who seem to think that negative events happen to people because of their sinfulness?
3. How do you think God responds to the tragedies that occur in the world?
4. How do you respond to Jesus' suggestion that the gardener fertilize the fig tree one more year?
5. When and how have you been reminded of your own need for repentance? Did the reminder come with a smile, or with some other feelings?
6. Have you ever doubted the mercy of God toward yourself?
7. Can you take some time now to talk to God honestly about your own need for forgiveness, your fear that you are not truly forgiven of some past sinfulness, or your gratitude for God's forgiveness?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fsc-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for March 20, 2022, the Third Sunday of Lent

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. He came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush. He was surprised to see that the bush was not consumed. God called out to him from the bush, "Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for you stand on holy ground. I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and heard their complaint against their slave drivers, so I know what they are suffering. I have come to rescue them from the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." Moses said to God, "But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you." The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. "This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations."

The Lord is kind and merciful. Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, and forget not all his benefits. He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills; He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion. The Lord secures justice and the rights of the oppressed. He has made known his ways to Moses, and his deeds to the children of Israel. Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.

Brothers and sisters, our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. They drank from a spiritual rock that followed them; the rock was the Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert. These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem?

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And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down.'"

Excerpts from Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; Psalm 103: 1-11; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12; and Luke 13:1-9

From Joe:

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for March 20th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. On this third Sunday of Lent, the Gospel from Luke starts with a call to repentance, which is followed by a parable about God's patience for those who have not yet repented. His parable about an unproductive fig tree indicates that God has patience, so long as the sinner eventually repents, before it is too late. Salvation is not about the greatness of the sin, but about the repentance from it. Jesus points out that when misfortune befalls someone, it should not be presumed that they somehow deserved it. "Do you think that these suffered because they were greater sinners? By no means! But if you do not repent, you will perish as they did."

The other readings all have direct references to Moses, representing God's kindness and mercy toward his people, and the Lord being a gracious God who pardons iniquities and redeems those who fear him. In the first reading from Exodus, the Lord spoke with Moses from a burning bush, telling him he intended to rescue his people from the Egyptians. "I am who am. Tell the Israelites, I AM sent me to you. The Lord, the God of your fathers, sent me to you." Psalm 103 proclaims, "The Lord has made known his ways to Moses, and his deeds to the children of Israel. He redeems your life from destruction. He is kind and merciful toward those who fear him." In the second reading, from the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "Our ancestors were all baptized into Moses through the cloud and the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and drank the same spiritual drink; they drank from a spiritual rock that was the Christ. Do not grumble as some of them did. Those who were struck down in the desert are examples to us, upon whom the end of ages has come. Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall."

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!