

LENT 2 (Luke 13:1-17, 31-35)

Since descending from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus, has set his face to Jerusalem as he heads to his death on a cross. And as he journeys, his followers want him to answer the questions we always want God to answer for us. Why do bad things happen to good people? Apparently some people had died in Siloam when a tower collapsed on them, a story that reminds us of deaths from earthquakes, and shootings that plague our societies, or people who die too young from accidents, cancer, drug overdoses, etc - people who were just going about their lives when it all fell apart. Did they deserve to die? Had they done something wrong?

But Luke's other illustration isn't as clear. Some Galileans had been murdered by Pilate. Their blood was mingled with their sacrifice, a most unusual event. First, they were in the temple in Jerusalem, because that's the only place a good Jew would have been making sacrifices.

Second, this particular atrocity has political and not just religious implications. The Roman authorities normally left the religious life alone. They may have taxed the Jews and kept them from civic and cultural freedom, but they tended to leave their religion alone. But in this story, Pilate has people murdered in the Temple as they are making sacrifice, mixing their blood with the sacrificial blood, a desolating sacrilege.

So this illustration may have just been about the first question; why do bad things happen to good people, or it may have been intended to stir up Jesus' nationalistic fervour. In any case, Jesus, on his way to the Cross event, had been calling for people to repent and to prepare for the transformation of the

world that was about to take place, yet he takes the time to address the misconceptions behind their questions. The common assumption of people then, and probably of people now, is that when bad things happen, we have somehow done something to deserve it. God is punishing us for our own sins or for the sins of our ancestors.

Jesus stops them in their tracks. “Do you think that because these people suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than the other Galileans?” Well, when he puts it that way, it doesn’t sound quite right. But maybe that is what he is really exposing. Perhaps our underlying thoughts when bad things happen to other people are really arrogance. “Those poor people ... they must have done something to deserve it. That could never happen to me ...” Most of us, hopefully don’t consciously think or believe that.

So Jesus calls us to fight the tendency of our culture to blame things on someone. Whether we’re blaming Pilate, or the engineers who designed the tower of Siloam, or the terrorists, or blaming a President or Prime Minister or a ruling party, we want to be able to blame things on somebody. Anybody.

But Jesus won’t let us stay there. Good people do die in bad accidents and from cancer. Bad people do live to be 100 and die in their sleep, and bad people also die in bad accidents and suffer illnesses. But blaming Pilate doesn’t change the fact that life is fragile, beautiful, and uncertain. Blaming Pilate doesn’t change the real issue.

“Do you really think those people are worse sinners than any of the rest of you?” Jesus asks. “Whether you die when a tower collapses, or die quietly

in your bed, don't ask the wrong question. The real issue is repentance. Yes, life is fragile and short, so don't worry about the righteousness of your neighbour. Worry about your own relationship with God. That ought to keep you busy for some time."

A rabbi was once asked by his disciple, "When is the best time to repent?" The rabbi said, "The best time to repent is on the day of your death." "But I don't know when that will be," the student said. "In that case," said the rabbi, "You should repent today."

And then Jesus goes on to talk about a fig tree. This fig tree has been in a man's vineyard for three years, which is plenty of time for a fig tree to start making figs, but it is barren. It is not doing its job. "Cut it down!", the owner says, a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Property is valuable, so if something isn't producing as it should, you get rid of it and plant something else. But the gardener argues for the unrepentant fig tree. "One more year. If I just spread some manure around it, I'm sure it will produce figs."

This may not be very good gardening advice, but it is a great illustration of the faithfulness of God, because God, like a gardener, gifts us with mercy beyond measure. Long after we should be moved out of the garden, God for reasons only God can understand, continues to prune us, continues to nurture us, continues to have faith in our potential.

So, when Jesus confronts the people about the Galileans and the Tower of Siloam folks, he tells them the parable of the fig tree and then asks, "what kind of fig tree are you? Are you producing fruit, or are you just taking up

space?” God wants us to be asking, “What will give us life so we can bear fruit?” Now if God were in the business of handing out punishment as consequence for our behaviour, none of us would be standing. The vineyard wouldn’t have a single fig tree left in it.

Thankfully, God and God’s unfathomable mercy keep our little fig trees still standing, still striving to be faithful disciples. So, our repentance does matter. Repentance, or turning back to God, should call us back to living for God, for standing up for justice, for actively seeking God’s kingdom on earth.

The fig tree parable should also be a reminder to us as people who labour in the vineyards. We are called to tend to the garden, to pull weeds, to add manure, to do the labour, but to also remember that the harvest isn’t ours. We don’t get to be the people who determine which fig trees are worthy. We are not in control of this harvest or of God’s kingdom. Thank God that we aren’t the ones in charge. But oh, how we wish we were!

In the omitted verses, following the fig tree parable, Jesus causes or continues to cause a ruckus. He has healed a bent over woman on the Sabbath and then shamed his critics with his response to their complaint. And shamed critics, end up being angry critics. He also offered up some difficult teachings about narrow ways, and the first being last. Then he compares the kingdom of God to yeast and to a mustard seed, something that starts small and then becomes gigantic, probably threatening Rome.

Jesus is picking a fight. He is tired of quietly submitting to injustice. And at that very hour, some Pharisees come to him to warn him that Herod wants

to kill him. We don't always think of "helpful" when we think of Pharisees. They seem to be an odd choice to bring warning. Since when have they been concerned for Jesus' safety?

Maybe they were sincerely concerned for Jesus' life. But we can also hear their comment in the voice of the annoying kid on the playground who tells you "I've told the teacher and she's coming and then you are going to be in a lot of trouble, which I will really enjoy watching."

In either case, they bring a warning to Jesus. He has gone too far. He has made too many people angry. He has upset the status quo one too many times. There is a price to be paid for demanding justice, for refusing to play Rome's game, for healing all those people and for refusing to be limited by how we think the world is supposed to work.

Herod is paying attention. The system of oppression, of injustice, of unhealth, and of un-creativity will not stand idly by while Jesus exposes its evil. It will fight back. It will kill him. And its agent is Herod. And we are told Herod wants to kill Jesus.

But even now, Jesus won't play that game. He refuses to be threatened, or quieted down. He responds with "you tell that FOX I'm busy. I've got people to heal, and work to do. Do not have time for that snake, I mean weasel, I mean fox, right now." Who wants to be the Pharisee to report that comment back to Herod? Jesus has given Herod all the time he is willing to give him, because Herod is not worth his time. Herod is just a flunky for Rome. Herod is a small matter compared to the Kingdom of God. And Jesus moves on to

talk about Jerusalem. He reminds us where he is headed. He reminds us what happens to prophets. He reminds us we don't always welcome God's messengers when they show up.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned. And you will never see me again until you say, 'Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'”

Jerusalem and her people have chosen to remain unrepentant, barren, and killing off anything that would turn them back towards the one true God. Even in their rejection, Jesus still loves them as he reminds them of painful truths and tries to prepare them for what is still to come.

One could understand if he called Jerusalem a bunch of foxes as he labelled Herod, since they kill all their prophets. But Jerusalem gets a different metaphor. “How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” Herod is the Fox. We are the baby chicks.

I came across a story about a farmer whose hen house burned down. Ike, the farmer's grandson, arrived just in time to help put out the last of the fire. As he and his grandfather sorted through the wreckage, they came upon one hen lying dead near what had been the door of the hen house. Her top feathers were singed brown by the fire's heat, her neck limp. Ike bent down to pick up the dead hen. But as he did so, he felt movement. The hen's four

chicks came scurrying out from beneath her burnt body. The chicks survived because they were insulated by the shelter of the hen's wings, protected and saved even as she died to protect and save them.

"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings ..." Once again, Jesus Christ calls us to the shelter of his protecting wings. He calls us to the safety of his arms stretched out for us on the cross.

Maybe that helps us to understand the lament and the passion in Jesus' own voice. It is the cry of a mother who is worried to death about not only Jerusalem, but about all of us. Like a mother, Jesus sees far more clearly than we the children see the danger we are in. Like a mother, Jesus knows we tend to over-estimate our powers and are prone to go off on our own, leaving the protective wings, to seek our own excitement and adventure. And like a mother, Jesus chases after us.

Like a mother, Jesus' love is so great that his all-consuming passion is to sweep us up into his protective arms. And although there are others in pursuit of him, namely Herod, Jesus, like a mother, is persistent. He sticks to what his love compels him to do. He pursues his flock with a passion.

This is a colourful and intriguing metaphor for God - a beautiful image of being sheltered under God's wings. The Psalmist says, "God will cover you with his feathers. The Lord will shelter you with his wings." Imagine God as a mother hen, sitting on you to keep you safe from foxes and weasels and other barnyard predators.

But we resist that shelter - illustrating the great struggle between God and humanity. God seeks safety, beauty, and life for us. We choose danger, independence, and freedom. And so Jesus offers this lament.

Jerusalem. Jerusalem. How I wish things were different. How I wish you weren't going to hand me over to the Fox, because who then will be left to shelter you under their wings? Do you not realize how vulnerable you are, with your little chicken wings and downy fluffy feathers? Why don't you believe me when I tell you these things?

Luke sees Jesus as a martyred prophet, killed as one who stands up to injustice, but also killed as someone who wishes there were another option. As Luke tells the story, Jesus has his eyes open on the way to the cross, but that doesn't make him like what he sees.

The challenge of Lent is to accept our own responsibility for this broken world in which we live. As we follow Jesus on his approach to the cross, look around our barnyard. Are we seeking the praise and attention of the foxes who want to bring us harm? Are we seduced by their worldly power, their glossy coats, their celebrity status when they tell us their lies?

Rome can save you. Unlock the gate. You don't need God. Come out from under his wings. Where do you see yourself in this metaphor? It's comforting to imagine yourself as a happy little chick, content to be in God's care. But perhaps you're more likely digging under the fence, trying to find a way to go join the foxes.

So, whether you are a chick taking shelter under wing, or a lamb being gathered back into the flock; whether you're a mountain goat seeking shelter from the wind on the leeward side of a big rock, or a patient under care of the great physician; know that the God who created us, is calling us to turn toward God, even as Jesus laments over Jerusalem and our brokenness. Whatever your metaphor for God, let us turn, again and again and again, toward the sheltering wings of God.

Amen

PRAYERS FOR LENT 2 MARCH 16, 2025

Gracious God, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we too have known Your love, and experienced Your care and provision. You invite us to extend that love to the world around us — to care for others as deeply as we care for ourselves. And so, we bring the needs of our world before You now.

Loving God, we pray for peace and reconciliation in Your world teetering on the brink of a prolonged period of uncertainty, instability and anxiety brought about by actions of some that have the potential to bring long lasting harm and suffering to others. Guide the decisions of world leaders to uphold and protect the well-being of their citizens, that the most vulnerable are cared for and that no one is left behind. In our own country, we pray for our newly-elected prime minister and all federal leaders as they prepare for an upcoming federal election. We pray for the growth of peace throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine, the Congo, Haiti, Sudan, and the Holy Land: that You, O God, will open new pathways to resolve conflicts and bring opportunities for safety and well-being to all people.

Life-giver, Pain-bearer, Love-maker, day by day You sustain the weary with Your word and gently encourage us to place our trust in You. Awaken us to the suffering of those around us; save us from hiding in denial or using hurtful words or actions that deepen tensions and escalate conflicts; give us grace to share one another's burdens in humble service.

We pray for the many who do not have enough: enough food to eat, or shelter to keep warm; enough meaningful employment, or money to pay their bills; enough medicine or access to health care. For refugees and displaced people: in refugee camps, fugitives from oppression, those in our detention centres, those who have disappeared, and for all separated families and traumatised children that those who have lost their former way of life may be guided to a new beginning for themselves and their loved ones.

We also pray for those who have more than enough to meet their daily needs, but who still struggle to find meaning and purpose in life; those who indulge in dangerous or self-medicating activities to dull their pain or loneliness.

We pray for those individuals and situations that need our prayers, whom we name aloud or in the silence of our hearts ... those who suffer physically, mentally, and/or emotionally; those undergoing medical treatments, those recovering from injuries or surgeries. We especially remember in our prayers;

Barb Smart, Ian and Jean McKain, Pr. Kristin Steele, George, and Markus Wickson. We pray for family caregivers, for health care providers including nurses and doctors, physio and occupational therapists and medical researchers who work to alleviate pain and suffering.

For growth in hope: that You, O God, will instill in our hearts a trusting reliance on Your Holy Spirit, filled with compassion, that is always with us in whatever our circumstances: that Your love will guide and strengthen us as we accompany all who are in need, especially those who have experienced a recent loss. In our ministry of presence help us to wait with them in their pain as they hope for healing and a new beginning.

We give thanks for those who are celebrating special occasions and anniversaries. We give thanks for this spring break, days in which children and families may be able to spend more times of rest and recreation together.

Creator God, our beautiful world that we call home is becoming increasingly harmed through our actions. We know that our practices of overconsumption and the extraction of irreplaceable natural resources, along with an overreliance on fertilizers and harmful chemicals, have eroded the health of the lands, waters and air we share. Help us to become aware of our actions that impact the well-being of one another and the well-being of Your Creation. Help us to be better stewards of the diverse and rich natural resources and splendid beauty found in Your Creation. Help us to work to restore, protect and preserve Your Creation. Help us to rediscover and observe the rhythms of Creation which You wisely put into place so that spring will follow winter and summer promises to bring a bounty that all may enjoy the fruits of Your good Creation.

O God, Your grace reaches out to all of us. Open our hearts to accept with gratitude the gift of grace You give us each new day. You call us to live as Your hands and feet in this world, working collaboratively together with one unified purpose - to love You with all our hearts and minds and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Strengthen us to live in a manner worthy of the Good News we have received, offering our lives in service of Your kingdom, where the last are first, and the first are last, and where grace abounds for all.

We pray for our churches and their leaders: Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond, Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, congregations of the Moravian Church, St. Paul's Lutheran church in Prince Rupert; Our Saviour Lutheran in Richmond - Rev. Christoph Reiners, our sister

congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, We pray for the upcoming Synod wide conversations next weekend where we will discern new ways for us to collaborate together; for all pastors, priests, deacons, musicians and volunteers. Bless them and their ministries.

Loving God, in this Lenten season help us to become more like Your compassionate Christ. Shape our thoughts, instill in us the desire to serve You and others; support and bless our efforts using our God-given gifts and abilities, that we may bring the best of who we are to each new day and give the best to those around us. All this, and whatever else remains unspoken in our hearts, we bring before You, trusting You will bring good about in, and through, our lives. Through the grace of Christ Jesus our Redeemer.

Our Father ...