

“Satisfy Your Hunger”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from Luke 13:31-35

Hear the words from the disciple Luke:

Read Luke 13:31-35

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you come to us, you meet us wherever we are, sometimes in the dark of night, sometimes in the light of day. Help us, Lord Jesus, when you come to us, to see you, to understand you, and to hear your voice as we wander through the wilderness. Amen.

Intro:

On Ash Wednesday, I asked you to enter into this Lent period of reflection, to go into the wilderness, by confronting your own mortality and your need to repent before God within the community of faith. As we have been walking in the wilderness we should have considered the question: what are my sins that I should be repentful for? Maybe some of us in the wilderness are experiencing suffering to the point of asking where is God? I cant find him through all this wandering.

For the commentaries and preaching resources written on the gospel lesson for this morning - Luke, chapter 13, I found it interesting that they all said the same thing: “Be careful with this passage!”

The warning is a good one, as this passage causes the faithful to ask some of the most common and complicated questions in all of Christendom. They are questions that virtually everyone who has experienced suffering or loss has considered: **where is God in this?**

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Even more poignant are the related questions: **Why is there so much suffering in the world? Is suffering inseparably linked to behavior? Why do bad things happen to good people?**

Then, there are the most pointed questions of all: **Does God cause suffering; and is suffering a form of Divine punishment?**

In his short but profound book, entitled *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis considers these questions and has this to say: “The existence of suffering in a world created by a good and almighty God... is a fundamental theological dilemma and perhaps the most serious objection to the Christian religion.”

For 2,000 years, preachers and scholars alike have searched for a reasonable, logical, and intellectual answer for the problem of suffering in Christian theology. From theologians like Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, to more contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth and others, much ink has been spilled attempting to offer a working answer for the problem of suffering—and each time, the answer comes up short.

Thus, engaging with Luke 13 is to enter an important conversation that can, at times, feel a bit crowded. Although theologians make admirable attempts to make sense of the complex human condition in the presence of the Living God, they too can drift into a mysterious and confusing “head space,” falling in love with words and language and ideas, while leaving the very real problem of pain and brokenness unanswered.

Even so, amidst all of its traps and dangers, to those who have been battered and bruised by the changes and chances of this life, Luke 13 offers an important word of nourishment. The context of the passage is this: Word reaches Jesus that Pilate has made a religious sacrifice to the Emperor—who was often considered a kind of demigod in those days—and as a part of

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that burnt sacrifice, he slaughtered a gathering of Galilean Jews and placed their remains on the sacrificial pyre.

And as if that is not horrifying enough, at the same time that Jesus hears of Pilate’s treachery, news arrives that a tower in Siloam has fallen, crushing eighteen people.

The crowd who relayed this horrible news to Jesus was burning with the same question that has echoed throughout Christendom for 2,000 years: “Why did this tragedy happen to these people?”

We’ve heard this question asked before elsewhere in Scripture: The Gospel of John asks the same question in a different way, as Jesus is asked about a man born blind: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?”

In other passages, well-intentioned but inadequate answers to the problem of suffering are suggested. Take, for example, the Book of Job, as Job’s so-called friends gather in the wake of Job’s terrible string of suffering and say well-meaning but dumb things like, “You need to seek God,” or “It could be worse,” or “God’s punishment is less than you deserve.”

Even today, it is difficult to pick up a newspaper or turn on the television without encountering vivid and often excruciating details of the latest tragedy that has befallen innocent victims. “Why has this terrible thing happened to such innocent people?” we often ask.

One of the most basic and widely-accepted rules of modern science is Newton’s third law (for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction)—that every effect is derived from a cause. We have put this equation onto everything from religion to sports to politics to the economy—you name it, we human beings love trying to explain it!

And so, things from as simple as a paint scrape on a new car or a favorite shirt getting a hole ripped into it by getting it caught on a loose screw to suffering as profound and heart-

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wrenching as a divorce or an ominous diagnosis, or even the death of a loved one, can cause us to ask the question, “What did I do to deserve this?”

In many ways, this search for answers is an central part of our humanness. From the depths of despair, there are times when any explanation is better than nothing at all. But as the crowd asks Jesus the question of who or what is to blame for these tragedies, Jesus cannot be clearer: Those who died were no better or worse than we are. Rather, Jesus says, we have all made mistakes and lost sight of God’s will for our lives, and we are all sinners.

What’s more, although Jesus insists that the relationship between sin and suffering is not causal—that is, God does not cause us to suffer because of our sin, Jesus also reminds us that sin itself can cause us to suffer. There is no question that Pilate’s murderous deeds—as well as the horrific actions perpetrated by today’s tyrants—are sinful. And sin has consequences.

Destructive behaviors, violence, the lust for power, and the quest for vengeance and retribution lead to much suffering in the world. The Church is called to speak out in opposition to these forms of suffering, and to do all in its power to combat them.

But with all of that said, what sense can be made of the parable of the fig tree? Why does Jesus tell that particular parable, and why does he do it here?

Oftentimes, parables are treated as a kind of allegorical “mad lib,” inserting familiar names and ideas into the text, then reading it as a understood fable of our own invention. With that equation, it becomes easy to read this parable as though it were the angry and vindictive God being soothed by Jesus meek and mild.

But what if it’s not quite that straightforward?

Humans, both ancient and modern, hold “fairness” as an important value. Fairness, in a moralistic sense, is often defined as “merit” receiving rewards for doing good and receiving

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punishment for doing evil. When we hit our targets at work, or make our grades at school, we expect a little gratitude, or maybe even a bonus. In the same way, when we fail to hit the target or earn the grade, we might expect some sort of ramification or punishment.

This concept of fairness is at play in the parable of the fig tree. The landowner says what most of us have come to believe about fairness: “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?” In other words, it hasn’t met its mark or lived up to its potential, and it’s affecting my bottom line, so it has to go.

But the gardener proclaims another possibility: “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Perhaps this parable is a reminder that God operates, not on our conventional conceptions of fairness and causes and effects; but rather, God operates on a wisdom that is contrary to what we think—patience, faithful tending, and hopeful expectation.

Rather than certainty; rather than providing a recipe for putting an end to human suffering; rather than offering a cure-all that would make the world turn on blissful peace and harmony, Luke 13 offers a word of good hope: **God is still tending the garden. God is still harvesting good fruit. God is still setting the table of plenty and inviting us to partake in solid helpings of repentance and forgiveness. He will always satisfy our hunger when we are lost and hungry through whatever wilderness we may face.**

God is still working in and through God’s people to bring light and life, love and peace to a broken and sinful world.

And in that, there is indeed hope for us all.

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Let us pray:

By your Grace
we are forgiven,
in your peace
our lives are lived.
By your touch
we know healing,
in your strength
are we made whole.
When this is forgotten,
our focus on self,
your face obscured,
forgive and restore.
Take our mustard seed of faith
and let it grow,
take root
and blossom
in our hearts and lives.
Through our Saviour
Jesus Christ
and in no other name
do we ask this. Amen

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Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.¹

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>