

Yr. C, Lent 3
March 20, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1370 words

Lessons: Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

“I am *so* fortunate,” she said, propped up with pillows in her hospital bed.

I nodded in agreement, absolutely trusting her authenticity, and—*yet*—completely incredulous that she could say such a thing under these circumstances. I mean, the nurse had just tried to jam a dose of medicine through her IV line, pulled loose from the vein in her arm. It was really painful for her. It was even painful for *me*...just seeing my friend grimace. “Could you try my other arm?” she pleaded. And then—moments later—her heart was once again overflowing with gratitude.

“I am so fortunate to have family, friends, a Church—who love me.”

I’ll be honest—sometimes when I’ve had an experience like that, it’s a little hard to hear an Old Testament lesson like this. I mean, I *like* hearing those reassuring words of the LORD, who says: “I have observed the misery of my people...I have heard their cry...I have come down to deliver them...!”

But I also find myself asking, “Why not in *this case*, O LORD? Why not *here*; why not *now*?” This *is* what we want, after all—a God who sees the misery of beloved people, a God who hears our cries for mercy. And, most of all, a God who takes immediate, decisive action to help us in our times of need.

So, why do bad things happen? And if God *is* all powerful, why can’t God just stop it? If our LORD is good, why won’t our LORD just take care of it *right now*?

One *simple* answer is that bad things happen to sinners—you know, as a punishment from God. St. Paul believed this about the Israelites after their exodus from slavery.

Consider his letter to the Corinthians from which we heard a few minutes ago. Paul asserts that the Children of Israel made God mad, and God struck them down in the wilderness. Paul claims that their sexual immorality was the reason that God murdered 23,000 of them on a single day. He claims that they put Christ to the test and were destroyed by snakes. Paul sees all of this suffering as a sort of divine teaching example—not a *living* example, but a *dying* example.

Well, I don’t choose to believe the ‘simple answer’ that St. Paul believed. *My beliefs* are more in alignment with Jesus’ view that you cannot just draw a simple, straight line between sin and punishment. I *do believe* we can learn from past sins; I just don’t believe that God *purposefully and manipulatively teaches* through punishment for sins, by cursing and destroying us.

I prefer to believe that God teaches us through *living examples*—not *dying* examples, but *living* examples like the example of my courageous friend who is facing bad things, and nevertheless *keeps on revealing* the faith, hope, and love of Jesus Christ with an incredibly thankful heart.

“I am *so* fortunate,” she said.

“Well, maybe so,” I replied. “*And*...I’m so fortunate...to have a friend like you, who shows forth the goodness and love of God in the face of bad things.”

Let me ask this question: With such powerful, *living* examples; why would a merciful God choose instead to teach us lessons through dying examples—examples of curses, examples filled with violence, suffering, and death.

I have another challenging question I would also like to ask. If God *actually did teach* by making such monstrous examples of people, cursing sinners with violence and suffering and death, would it even be *ethical* to worship such a God as that?

I mean, doesn't *that kind of teaching* lead us to choose the 'simple answer' chosen by Pontius Pilate—who, after all, used the violence of crucifixion to set an example?

I'm more interested in the teaching example of Jesus—who, after all, courageously and faithfully *endured* the crucifixion and showed us that bad things happen...even to *really good people*, like Jesus.

And those bad things do not represent the last word. God's love is with us through it all...especially in the valley of the shadow of death. So, we need not fear any evil.

As the Song of Solomon proclaims, "Love is (as) strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."¹ Love...is...forever.

In today's Gospel, we get to see Jesus' not-so-simple answer to the question of sin and suffering. Jesus is asked to make a simple, straight connection between some Galilean murder victims and God's judgment, but he *refuses* to give the simple answer, even though it is the answer the crowd wants to hear.

You know, *at first*, Jesus' answer sounds like bad news! For he says, "Unless *you* repent, you will all perish like they did." In other words, *nobody's* safe. None of us gets a free pass from bad things happening. We're all mortal. But this isn't some simple answer about God's judgment;

No! *It's a bold call to action*. It's a bold invitation to open your heart to God's grace and truth; and to ask God to fill your heart brimful with God's own holy and life-giving Spirit!

You see, Jesus *refuses* to make a teaching example out of those poor Galileans *or* out of the eighteen unfortunate victims who died under the Tower of Siloam. Instead, the teaching example Jesus chooses...is that of a worthless fig tree, taking up precious space in the garden.

So, what would be the *simple answer*? The simple answer would be to cut it down and remove it *immediately*.

But what is *Jesus' answer*? Give it another chance. Give it some room to grow, some nurture, and some nutrients. Give it some time, for goodness' sake. Let's see what happens! Maybe, just maybe, it will respond and start bearing amazing fruit again.

Dear people, we are capable, through our own fault, of destroying ourselves. When that happens, it's not God's judgment; it's just our fault.

But...we are also *fully capable*, of opening our hearts to God's grace and truth...we are able to fill our hearts with God's holy and life-giving Spirit, and to bear some amazing fruit. *Even* in the face of suffering, we are capable of bearing good fruit. Even when bad things happen, we are capable of bearing good fruit.

¹ Song of Solomon 8:6-7

I know it's true, because I've seen this kind of fruit with my own eyes. I know it because I've heard this kind of fruit with my own ears. I know it because I have *received* this kind of fruit *like a gift*. You have too.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that there *are no* simple answers about why bad things happen. There are no simple answers which enable us to dismiss our enemies. There are no simple answers which allow us to dismiss our friends, or *even...* to dismiss ourselves. The Good News for those who trust Jesus' answer is that *none of us* are easily dismissed.

By the grace and mercy of God, we have fresh, new chances to become fruitful, no matter what we've done *or left undone* in the past.

We are *so fortunate* to be nurtured by the rich faith, hope, and love of Christ; and to develop strength and courage like we never imagined possible. We are *so fortunate* to have received the gift of God's Holy Spirit, which enables us to live with thankful hearts, even when bad things happen.

This is how we become *living examples* of God's abundantly fruitful life, like my courageous, grateful friend is doing.

It was time to let my friend get some rest. So, I put away the miniature chalice and paten, and closed up the little, black Communion box. I said, "I love you." and her smile glowed like the sun. She made an exaggerated wink, and responded, "I love you more!"

We are *so fortunate*. *When* bad things happen we are so fortunate to share the love of God in the way of Jesus Christ...and with the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit.

It's not a simple answer...it's *better!* It's a way of life...a bold invitation to a fruitful way of life.

Amen.