

Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13:1-9

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

“O God, eagerly we seek you,  
our souls thirst for you.

Let us behold your power and your glory.” AMEN!

Thirsting... there’s hardly a better location  
to experience thirst than in the  
wilderness of the Holy Land.

There is the literal thirst for water like one  
might encounter while trying to traverse  
the desert and there is a thirst in the  
psalm that expresses a deeper  
feeling of isolation or hunger  
within humanity.

Well, here we are at the center of Lent.

And among the gifts of the spiritual  
disciplines of Lent we are asked  
to consider our thirsts.

What are you thirsty for?

Are some of the answers that come  
to mind important or are they petty?  
Maybe there’s something we thirst for  
that damages our body.

It's good to identify that thirst and seek  
help in its removal from our lives.

“Psalm 63 emphatically declares that our thirsts  
go far beyond water or anything else  
that this world can tangibly provide.”

The psalm's words and rhythmic tone  
reveal a depth of our most essential thirst  
by referencing it in connection to our soul.

The writer is thirsty... but not for water and  
Lent calls us to attention on our greatest,  
and most important, thirst.

So, half way through Lent,  
how has your journey been?

Be honest with yourself.

Have you been able to fast (noting your thirst),  
pray and meditate, and be  
generous in the giving of alms?

Most of us would say, “ehhh...”  
Some good and some not so good.

It's quite a human thing that we do

when we associate some of our failures  
to the bad things that might  
be happening to us.

For instance, it is very human for us  
to connect missing church on a Sunday  
with later banging your toe on the table leg.

Our minds tell us, “I should have gone to church.”

Or what about when we give a bit extra to charity  
and then suddenly receive a bank error  
in our favor.

Does that ever happen? :-)

But you know what I mean, we connect  
that doing something good brings about  
a heavenly reward.

Now, I don't want to discount that  
positive things happen when we do  
positive things but we also need to be  
careful with this kind of  
reward/punishment theology.

It is the premise behind most self-help books.

This is what made the book “The Secret”  
so popular in the 2000's.

The power of positive thinking is helpful teaching  
but ought not to be confused with good theology.

When we make this confusion in concern to God,  
we find that our relationship with the divine  
is merely a transactional relationship.

If I do this God will do that,  
if I don't do this then God won't do that.

We have all done this kind of thinking  
one time or another because it helps us  
in trying to make sense and explain  
why good things happen and  
why bad things happen.

It is tempting to use the pulpit as  
a transactional place to persuade a message.

To preach strategies one can use to trick God,  
instead of urging the true meaning of repentance.

Repentance sounds like an opposing force  
to God's grace and in that way,  
it that lures bullies to the pulpit.

It is tempting to be a little judgmental up here  
and use the 12-14 minutes to

make all of YOU repent.

But, a sermon should urge people to a new point of view and a renewed understanding about God and our place in God's world.

A sermon should urge people to discover a different reality that's not about trying to please an impossible Deity.

Lent communicates that God can be loving AND have a certain criteria for our behavior. (Pause)

In our gospel this morning we find people coming to Jesus seeking to get his opinion on current affairs.

Pilate had executed a group of Galileans while they were at worship.

He'd sent troops to kill them while they made their sacrifices before God.

This would have hurt Jesus on multiple levels.

Since Jesus was from Galilee the act of violence impacted him directly.

Surely he knew them and may have been even close to some of them.

Even though this tragic event is not documented by any other historian we do know that Pilate had a history of such acts of violence that are documented by historians.

Being a pawn of the Roman Empire, he epitomized the way such leaders survived by inflicting fear on the people they were supposed to govern justly.

The fact that he did what he willed during the ritual of worship was something that Jesus could have addressed.

It was likely what people hoped he'd address, but instead he chose to ask a question.

“Were those who were slaughtered worse sinners than other Galileans because of how they suffered?”

By asking this question, and not addressing the act of terror done by a brutal political leader, Jesus addressed a bigger problem.

Which was the popular understanding that  
was circulating that God punishes those  
who sin and uses catastrophes like  
terrorism and murderous dictators  
to dole out necessary penalties.

To this logic, Jesus sends an emphatic, “NO.”

He went the direction he did, not because  
he didn't care about those who perished  
nor did he fear standing up for justice  
against despots,

but more importantly he needed to be sure  
that people did not believe that the  
decisions of Pilate and the agents of Rome  
were synonymous with God's justice.

They, like us, wanted to find a *reason* why  
they were slaughtered.

They must have sinned, done something wrong  
for them to be slaughtered.

It is an example of victim blaming and  
Jesus will have none of it. (Pause)

So then Jesus introduced  
another type of tragedy.

Eighteen people were crushed under a tower  
near the the pool of Siloam in Jerusalem.

No foul play in this disaster but people  
still want to know why these  
bad things are happening.

Jesus used the unfortunate event to again teach  
that it didn't occur because of moral depravity  
or punishment from God.

They weren't worse offenders than all  
the others in Jerusalem.

Disasters happen and calamities occur,  
we will not be able to change that truth,  
but we can change something...

we can change our minds about why  
they happen and recognize that we too  
will perish unless we repent.

And Jesus then taught them,  
and teaches us, about repentance.

Jesus won't answer all of life's questions for us,  
but he will teach us that we will be disappointed  
if we think healthy and carefree days



will always be there.

First, we must change our minds and  
that change begins with repentance.

Bad things will still happen to us...  
unexpected tragedies will occur or we might  
live a long life but still, one day,  
we will all die.

That might be a jolting reality, but for us,  
according to Jesus,

it is the only way to encounter life,  
be embraced by God, and find our purpose in  
a new and truer way.

Repentance is not a transaction that guarantees  
an easy, stress, or disease free life.

It is not about trying to make transactions  
with a demanding God, but a changing of  
the mind where finding peace and joy

occurs deep within even when they are proving  
to be hard to find in life around us. (Pause)

This important teaching guides us into Jesus' parable.

A teaching story about the importance of repentance.

So, there's this landowner, a gardener,  
a tree, there's fruit (or lack of it),  
a vineyard, soil and even manure...

which one are you? :-)

Not which one is the person sitting here or there!

Which one are you?

Take your bulletin home or open your Bibles  
to Luke 13:1-9 this week and decide.

You might be one or more of the  
characters in the parable. (Pause)

While you participate in that  
important Lenten work be encouraged.

Each is a valuable piece to Jesus...  
even if we are the manure!

Am I right, all you gardeners out there?!?!

The eye opener is if we are the fruitless tree.

Then we need to take notice.

In closing, let's take a moment to decide

which one St. Stephen is in 2022?

This parable has an uncomfortable  
sense of urgency about it.

“One more year!”

That’s not much time, but then again  
neither is the season of Lent.

Use the time to re-orient ourselves to be intentional  
in how we are obedient to God.

Repentance is still possible but not to push fear  
but to discover the beauty of God and  
the gift of today.

AMEN!