

Lent 3, Year C  
March 24, 2019  
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Jesus had just finished a question and answer session with his disciples and a large crowd when the conversation turned to the sudden death of some local people who had been killed while offering sacrifice to God. Jesus responded to the question implicit in their sharing of this news: Do you think this is because they somehow deserved to die? His answer is straightforward and unsettling: **“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”** They, just like eighteen other people killed unexpectedly when a tower collapsed, were no more or less sinful than anyone else. There is no assurance that we will not die just as they did. As Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors once said, **“No one gets out of here alive.”**

Jesus speaks bluntly to our fear of dying suddenly and unprepared. The reason the people mentioned in today’s reading died is not because they were somehow terrible people, or in some way deserved to be struck by tragedy. They were not fundamentally different from us. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, **“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** If we were to be judged by God upon our sudden death, that fact would be blazingly apparent. As

Clint Eastwood's character said succinctly in the movie *Unforgiven*,  
**"We all got it coming, kid."**

So if I can't put any real distance between myself and the people who were shot by the disgruntled former co-worker in Aurora, Illinois last month; or the people massacred while worshiping in New Zealand last week, or rural Texas church near my Mom's hometown, or in the midst of Bible study in Charleston, South Carolina; or the folks affected by devastating floods in the Midwest, or the horrific fires that swept through miles of forest in California; how am I supposed to sleep at night? It is a tempting but false assumption to think that I won't get cancer when someone else does because I don't smoke, eat pretty well, and exercise. It is folly to think I am safe in my car because I am a careful driver. It is an illusion that I can protect my children from all harm, however much I wish I could. I remember well the pain of my friend Julie when her daughter was killed and other people dealt with their own anxiety by saying it must have been either Julie's fault or her daughter's, when neither was the case.

What does make a difference? Jesus tells a parable. A man comes looking for fruit on his fig tree when after three years it had failed to produce. It is judged as wasting space and the owner says to cut it

down. The gardener asks the man for one more year, for a chance to nurture the tree and see if it finally blossoms. What is the point of the parable? It was the gift of a close call, a near miss, a warning shot, or a do over. Choose your favorite phrase. It's not difficult to understand that the metaphorical tree represents you and me. Every time death comes close enough to make us stop and reconsider, we should take it as an opportunity to do just that. Rather than shaking off the reaction we have to the latest tragedy, we should pay attention to the chance we have to change our selves and our lives. What would it take to get us to take that invitation seriously?

Several years ago I served in a parish where a young boy was killed in an accident. When I met with the youth group one of the girls had not heard about his death. I explained to her what had happened and, instead of being upset as I had expected, she paused and said, "**Oh, that makes sense.**" When I asked what she meant she said, "**I was wondering why my parents have been so nice to me all week.**" We may chuckle, but we also might recognize the truth of her insight. We behave differently when the fragility of life is made real to us. Our priorities, so often dulled in the frazzled reality of daily life, become very clear. We instinctively do what Jesus is calling us to do on a regular

basis, which is to turn our attention to God and order our lives anew. That is what repentance means. It means to turn toward God like true north on a compass and reorient from there. The challenge is to hold on to that perspective when we move past the current tragedy. The only way to do that is with practice and a whole lot of grace from God. Isaiah encourages, “**...return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.**” When any mere mortal would have lost patience with us long ago, Jesus demonstrates God’s willingness to give us just a little more time, and some help with the process.

What is it that will help you take seriously the need to stop and reorient? The next time a car narrowly misses yours? When the medical test you are anxious about comes back with something manageable? When your child gets clean or sober? When your best friends announce their divorce and you take another look at your spouse? Don’t wait. Stop in your tracks today. Turn to God. Give thanks. Ask for help where you need it. Be patient and compassionate with others. Beginning again can start right here, right now. It can be followed by pausing each evening to name three things you are grateful for, and by waking up each morning with thanks for a new day. You

have been given another chance, both at this life and the one to come.

Don't waste it.

Amen