

It's Not Anything You Did
March 8, 2026 Lent III

Luke 18:31-34

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Luke 13:1-9; 21:29-33

Have you ever been in conversation with someone, a friend or family member, who has been struggling with challenging circumstances in their life - grief, tragic loss, perhaps multiple challenges of difficult times or issues, and they ask, "what have I done to deserve this?" As much as we might believe that God doesn't cause bad things to happen to us or punish us for our sin or wrongdoing, we can still easily go to this kind of thinking when times get tough. It is because this theology, this kind of thinking about God is deeply rooted in religion. On Wednesday at our Lent Service, this was very evident as we read Exodus 20 listing the 10 commandments and it was surprising to read in verse 5: "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation^[b] of those who love me and keep my commandments." Sometimes when we hear scripture we can hear things we don't remember noticing before. So, there it is, in one of our basic tenets of faith, that God punishes us for our sins and even our parents' sins. We heard reference to this kind of thinking as well last week in the Minute for Mission about the grandmothers in Kenya caring for their grandchildren because the mothers have died of AIDS. We heard that the churches preach about HIV as a punishment for sin and the grandmothers experience this stigma too. Many of us can remember this thinking in the 80's when HIV/AIDS was first discovered and into the 90s as the crisis continued. But in today's day and age it is hard to hear that this kind of attitude still prevails. Jesus is clear in our passage today (as well as elsewhere in the gospels) that this thinking named in exodus, is no longer valid and is not how God works.

In the gospel reading today from Luke 13, Jesus is asked about some Galileans who were killed in the temple while offering sacrifices, inferring that this happened to them because of their sin. Jesus is emphatic that they were no worse sinners than any other Galilean and offers another example of 18 people dying from a tower collapsing and emphasizing that they are no worse offenders than anyone else. In both examples he then calls all to repent or else perish as they did.

Jesus' statements change the traditional perspective and challenges it. This teaching of Jesus would shock his audience because the wide-spread, taken for granted, deeply held, bed-rock belief was that EVERYTHING happened for a reason. God is just, and if bad things happen to someone, it has to be because - in some way - they deserve it. Or - in some way - something good will come from it and it only seems like a bad thing to us. But Jesus turns this thinking around, knowing that he will be put to death by the Roman authorities after being handed over by the Judaen authorities as described to the disciples in the reading from Luke 18 today. Jesus also wants them to know that he will die because of the injustice of the Roman and Judean systems not because of some divine plan. How he responds when his arrest happens is also an example of non-violent resistance as the way forward. His resurrection affirms it as well.

The call to repent in relation to the stories of the tragedies is about turning toward God's desires for the world, as Jesus has shown them to live out peaceful resistance and non-violence. Violent revolution only leads to more violence and death, as the readers of Luke would be aware of given that this gospel was written after the Jewish Revolt of 66-70CE which resulted in massive loss of life and the destruction of the temple. Jesus knew this would be the result of violent revolt and that this was what they hoped the Messiah would lead them to, so he is calling them to repent of this thinking and behaviour. The call to repent is also about one never knowing what will happen, when we will die, so we are to make the most of life now, to live in love and compassion not violently and in judgement.

Following Jesus and living in love and compassion, prepares us to deal with whatever we face, with the support and love of God in community.

The story then turns to a message of a fig tree not growing or producing fruit. The owner wants it cut down but the gardener encourages patience, to allow them to nurture it, fertilize it and see if it bears fruit next year. This is about a message of God's grace and offering hope to those whom Jesus is telling to repent. There is time to change and bear God's fruit. This story helps moves people from tragedy to hope – God's judgement is not like a disaster or a slaughter but about time and hope, like the fig tree. In this season of Lent, which is a season of self reflection and self examination we could reflect on: what kind of fertilizer do we need, how do we need to be nurtured to bear the fruit God calls us to? How can we bear the fruit of love and compassion, kindness and grace, peace and justice that is all part of God's abundant kindom? God is not calling us to completely change, just to bear the fruit we were created for. Jesus message about 'repent or perish' is calling the people and us to recognize that when we are not relating to others as God would have us do, we are already perishing – life is less full, less fruitful, and we and those close to us are diminished. When we live in faith and love, our lives are a blessing to others as well as ourselves.

The people of Israel were looking and hoping for a Messiah who would rout their oppressors and establish Israel's worldly dominance. As the true Messiah come from God, Jesus had a quite different mission. One of loving kindness, compassion for the marginalized and challenging the systems and structures of oppression through non-violent means. The parable of the fig tree confronted them with a last chance to recognize him as the Messiah, albeit a different kind of Messiah, and to respond to God's mercy, or find that there would be a limit to God's forbearance. Jesus message about repentance is not as much for avoiding a disastrous death but moreso for the purpose of embracing a fuller life. God longs for us to be co-creatively fruitful in abundant life. He calls us to abundant life and grace with him.

The emphasis of Jesus is to seek the repentance of Israel's leaders and systems so that they might become, in fact and function, what they had been called for over a millennium to be – God's shalom kingdom on earth. But the weight of this section of Luke is that such is not about to happen. The systems, committed to their control and dominance of the people and the accumulation of their wealth and power that results from such dominance, reject all efforts by Jesus for their reform. There is no intention on their part to change even one iota of the arrangement that has benefited them so well for so long. So it is, that Jesus begins to proclaim the birthing of an alternate system – the kingdom of God among those who will embrace it for their lives and their society (whether Jew or Gentile). And in these latter chapters of Luke, Jesus describes that kingdom and explores how that new order of God's will be activated in human society until it eventually overwhelms that society. He knows he will suffer for it, and wants his followers to know the importance of continuing on in love and in peace. It is an important message for us today as we witness authorities seeking control and dominance through violence, not learning the lessons of the past that violence only breeds more violence. We are seeing evidence of this as the US and to a lesser degree Canada, are being warned of potential terrorism attacks by Iran as a result of the US and Israeli war against them.

Returning to the stigma of HIV/AIDS, I share this story: Belinda Mason, a rural Kentucky native, mother of two, who contracted AIDS at age thirty-two was asked, "Do you think AIDS is a punishment from God?" She replied, "AIDS may be a test, not of the infected, but of those not infected. It tests their ability to respond in love."

May we respond in love to those who are suffering tragedy, crisis or pain and help them to understand that it is nothing that they did to deserve what they are going through. May we remember the same when we are struggling with challenging realities. May we know God's love and support

through it all, and commit ourselves to bearing fruit of love, compassion, kindness, grace and peace.