

**3 Lent
March 24, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In this morning's reading from Luke's gospel Jesus is confronted with the dilemma of good people ... just and righteous people ... incurring a devastating fate. Innocent Galileans had been slaughtered by the Roman Prefect as they were offering their religious sacrifice at the Temple ... and simple bystanders were crushed as a poorly built tower in Siloam fell on them. What Jesus was challenged with is an age-old question that continues to haunt us today. A little over a week ago a lone gunman killed 50 worshippers at a Mosque in New Zealand ... eerily similar to Pilate's slaughter of Jews at the Temple as they were making their sacrifices. And, just two weeks ago an Ethiopian Airliner crashed ... seemingly because of flaws in the construction of the aircraft ... killing all 157 on board. It wasn't a building falling on them ... it was like they were in a building falling from the sky.

So how do we know this story about Jesus told over 2,000 years ago to be true in our lives today? We need only look at the headlines. The Ethiopian Airline crash ... the shooting in New Zealand ... the cyclone in Mozambique. When the Pharisees came to Jesus he was asked, "What unrighteous act did these people do that brought this on them?" Jesus turned the question inside-out, yet it is a question that continues to haunt us, "Why do bad things happen to good people."

At such times as these ... horrible tragedies of nature and humanity ... the ones that make headlines, and those experienced under our own roofs ... at time like these we look for answers ... even when there may be none. Yet, fixing blame is always a temptation ... maybe we blame an "evil" force ... or we place the blame is on the victims because they were not so "good" ... or possibly even blame God for allowing it to happen. However, maybe the question of "Why" is too small, too flat, too confining. Maybe the question needs to be turned inside-out like Jesus did ... maybe we need to ask a wiser question ... a deeper question ... a question that expands possibility.

Jesus was asked these questions, "Why did these terrible things happen? Why is there so much pain in the world? Why does a good God allow human suffering?" His response ... "Ask a better question."

There are libraries of books that address this theological issue ... volumes upon volumes. Harold Kushner's book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," published in the early 1980s was a national bestseller. The problem I see is that even when we think we have an answer it doesn't change things ... it doesn't change the bad things that happened. It doesn't

change the pain and anguish that accompany those bad things. The answer to the question “Why?” just doesn’t change anything!

As Luke’s Gospel makes clear, the people who ask Jesus their versions of the “Why?” question already have an answer in mind. They didn’t approach Jesus with a blank slate. They showed up hoping to confirm what they already believed. That is, they came expecting Jesus to verify their deeply held assumption that people suffer because they are bad people ... because they are sinful. They assumed that bad folks get what they deserve ... that bad things happen to bad people.

It is tempting for us 21st century Christians to look at such beliefs and feel smugly superior in comparison. But how different, really, are the beliefs we hold about human suffering? When the unspeakable happens, what default settings do we revert to? You’ve heard the platitudes. Sometimes I find them simply unbearable ... “Nothing happens outside of God’s perfect plan.” “God is testing your character through this tragedy.” “The Lord never gives anyone more than they can bear.” “Buck up ... other people have it worse.”

When faced with bad things happening to me, good folk ... in all sincerity and with good intent ... have said these things to me. I have listened politely ... after all I wear a collar. Yet, the whole time I was thinking, “This is not helpful. This is absurd. This is BS!”

The problem with every one of these answers is that they hold us apart from those who suffer. They keep us from the agonizing work of deep empathy and compassion. They keep us from embracing each other ... embracing our common brokenness ... our common humanity. When Jesus challenged his listeners’ assumptions and told them to repent ... to turn their life around ... before it was too late, I think part of what he was saying is this: any question that allows us to keep a distance from the mystery and reality of another person’s pain is a question we need to turn inside-out.

“Ask another question,” Jesus says to the folks who bring him the news about Pilate’s violence and the human failure of design at the tower of Siloam. “Ask another question,” he says to us when we fall into the trap of speaking about “us” and “them.” In our self-righteousness we make judgements upon those who have bad things happen to them. Just read some of the Letters to the Editor in the Record about homeless people. “They wouldn’t be homeless if they were good people. They are all drunks, addicts, and pedophiles” said one letter just this week. And it happens all too often ... their sinfulness and our piety ... or their conservative backwardness and our progressive sophistication. You are asking the wrong questions ... you are mired in irrelevance ... you are losing your life in your effort to save it. Start over again. Ask a better question. Go deeper. Be brave. Reframe your thoughts.

So, what is the better question? If asking “Why?” won’t get us anywhere, what kind of question will? Is there a question to be answered at all? In typical fashion, Jesus addresses the problem with a story. It may sound like a cop-out, but I don’t really think so.

The story Jesus told is about a fig tree: A landowner had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, Jesus told his listeners. One day, the landowner went looking for fruit on the tree, and found none. Incensed, he confronted his gardener: "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree," he said, "and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it waste the soil?" But the gardener begged his employer for more time: "Sir, let the tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, then you can cut it down."

What an odd story to tell at such a moment! What on earth does a fruitless fig tree have to do with Pilate's dreadful killing spree, or with the horrible design failure that toppled the tower of Siloam? What is Jesus trying to say?

I think for starters, he is saying, "Engage in story ... listen to this parable ... rather than seeking some platitudes." Platitudes are flat. Theories don't heal. And questions that call for shallow answers aren't worth asking in the face of tragedy. But stories? Parables? They are meant to open up possibility. They are conversation starters. Stories include, unmake, and transform us ... they reframe the possibilities. Why did those Galilean Jews die? Why did the tower fall? Well, sit down, and let me tell you about a fig tree ...

This story engages me for a number of reasons, not the least of them is that I have a fig tree that has not produced any figs in three years ... and there have been times when I have considered cutting it down. However, like the parable, this spring I am digging around it and putting manure ... and fertilizer ... on it. And, maybe if I spray some Neem oil on it as well it won't drop its leaves, and then maybe ... just maybe ... I might eat a fig or two later this summer.

But there are other reasons this story engages me. It asks questions ... questions for the characters in the story to address ... and questions for you and me to address. There are three characters ... the landowner, the gardener, and the tree ... and all those characters are alive and well in all of us. Now, some may question whether the tree is really a character, but bear me out.

When I consider the bad things that happen to people in the world around me, I have to ask myself a number of questions. In what ways am I like the absentee landowner watching the fig tree, but doing nothing to improve its situation. How do I stand apart from those bad things that happen to good people and in so doing choose to stand apart from where life and death actually happen? How am I refusing to get my hands dirty by not getting involved? How do I avoid the pain that others may be feeling? When am I pronouncing judgments on others that I have no right to pronounce? Do I look for scarcity in the world rather than for potential and possibility and abundance? Where in my own life ... or in the lives of others ... have I prematurely called it quits, saying, "There's no life here worth cultivating. Cut it down." What relationships ... with others and myself ... have I given up on too quickly? How do I use those bad things that have happened to me as an excuse to become disengage from others ... and sometimes disengaged from myself?

I also know that as well as being like the absentee landowner, I can also be like the gardener ... and it also raises questions. Where in my life am I willing to accept the invitation to go into the muck and manure ... to get down and dirty ... to attempt the hard work? Where do I see life and possibility where others see death and decay? How willing am I to pour hope into a project I can't control? Am I brave enough to sacrifice my time, effort, love, and hope into this tree ... this relationship ... this project ... this cause ... this passion ... this tragedy ... this injustice ... with no guarantee of a fruitful outcome? Can I be the prophet of a future ... a future not my own?

Finally, I have to imagine what it must be like for the fig tree. Planted in this ground, but unable to be responsible for its own fate. As the soil below the fig tree loses its nutrients, the fig tree slowly loses its capacity to do what it was created to do. So, I have to look at the questions ... in what ways am I like this fig tree? Un-enlivened? Un-nourished? Unable or unwilling to nourish others? In what ways do I feel helpless or hopeless? Ignored or dismissed? What kinds of tending would it take to bring me back to life? Am I willing to receive such intimate, consequential care from another ... or give it to myself? Will I consent to the change that would happen to me ... the change that moves my out of the status quo? Might I dare to flourish in a world where I feel I have become invisible?

I won't lie, I still ask the "Why?" question. I ask it because I want to understand. But, I also ask it because ... at times ... I'm afraid. I ask it because mystery unnerves me. Whatever the bad thing that has happened to me I don't want it to happen again. Maybe if I could only understand ... if I could somehow comprehend ... what was the cause of this bad thing that happened to me I could somehow control the circumstances ... the consequences ... the after-effects. If only I could find something to blame ... something to pin it to ... maybe the pain would go away. If only ... If only ...

And yet, every time I ask "Why?" I know I am asking too small a question. I have to turn the question inside-out. "Why" is simply not a life-giving question. In my experience, whenever ... and however ... the question gets answered the fact is that the bad thing that happened ... the bad things that happen to you and to me ... cannot be undone. And, answering the question never has changed the feelings about what has happened ... there is still the pain to deal with.

Why hasn't the fig tree produced fruit yet? Well ... here's the manure, and here's a spade ... get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world ... even to good people? Don't waste your time on a philosophical conundrum ... instead, go weep with someone who's weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things that have the potential to grow. Go look your own failings in the eye and turn around ... repent ... while you can.

In short: imagine a deeper story ... a more expansive story ... a story that redeems scarcity with abundance ... a story that moves us from spectator to participant ... from observer to one who is engaged.

Ask a better question ... live the question! Do it now. Why? Because there is no “us” and “them” in God’s world. Because there are no guarantees for any of us. Because all of us are beloved children of God ... all of us. And, at the same time, all of us are perishing, and all of us need the care of a hopeful, patient gardener. So, ask a better question ... live a better question ... and do it now before it is too late.

Amen.