

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Third Sunday of Lent: March 23, 2025

“From Tragedy to Fruitfulness”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the third Sunday of Lent. Today’s reading starts out with a quick review of the current events in Jesus’ time. Pontius Pilot was known for his recklessness with human life, to the point of having assassinated those who were at ritual in the Temple, therefore mingling their blood with the animals sacrificed. Then people told Jesus of the tower falling in Siloam that brought about casualties, and (just like we have a tendency to do today) these people were asking Jesus if those people deserved their untimely ends.

Listen to what Jesus said: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you.” “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you.” “But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Today, Jesus is not offering a cause and effect explanation, he’s offering a choice between life striving for the kingdom of God and the death of having not produced good fruit in life. And that choice is always before us. Every moment is a burning-bush moment of divine presence, hope, new life and more life. What if those things, those historic tragedies are not the point of today’s gospel but instead it is our reaction to trauma that is the point Jesus

is trying to bring forth? I don't mean that we should diminish the losses in our life and time, or in the life and time of Jesus, but that we should feel them more acutely and allow them to call us into a better way of being. And that begins within us.

Tyrants, fallen towers, and tragedy intensify the preciousness of life and bring greater awareness to what we are doing with our lives. They intensify the value of relationships and invite us to consider how we are treating creation and one another. They intensify the meaning of this moment and remind us that nothing should be wasted or taken for granted. They intensify the urgency and need to redeem the past and open our eyes and hearts to a new and better way, to the possibility of the impossible.

The normal human response to tragedy is often "why", "why now", "why here", and of course, the most common response, "why me?" Yet I offer a new consideration: not "why", but "how". "How" is usually a better question than "why". "How" opens the way, "why" narrows the way. "How" tends toward the future, "why" tends toward the past. "How" is imaginative, "why" is definitive.

How do we find our place amid uncertainty and turmoil? How do we not lose ourselves to the pain and tragedies of our lives and the world? How do we keep ourselves sane and loving in the midst of conflict and violence? How do we sharpen our vision to see more clearly? How do we keep our hearts soft and keep hope? How do we live amidst death?

"Repent." That's Jesus' answer to the "how" question, and he says it twice in today's gospel.

Again, Jesus is not offering a cause-and-effect explanation, he's offering a choice between a life of fruitfulness, mercy and living; or the death of judgment, rise of hopelessness. Every moment is a burning-bush moment of divine presence, hope, new life and more life. The only question is whether we will "turn aside to see this great thing."

Will we turn aside to find the courage, hope, and perseverance needed in the moment? Can we turn aside to address the needs and interests of another? Will we turn aside and break our usual patterns of thinking and acting? Will we turn aside to see the opportunity for love, compassion, and forgiveness even in the stress of tragedy? Can we turn aside from the fear and distractions and begin within?

And just when Jesus has brought the crowd into these questions, he returns to the question of whether those who had a tragic ending were more or less sinful than those who were listening to him at the moment and he starts with the parable of the fig tree.

Interestingly enough, if the man in the parable is the stand-in for God, and Jesus is the gardener, we certainly have a merciful and patient gardener - waiting years for the fig tree to bear fruit. Not only that, but the gardener holds hope. Hope for just one more year to provide a fruitful harvest.

The fig tree (much like us) left alone may not produce fruit. Only after digging up the earth around the tree and putting manure on it, will the possibility be increased to produce a crop. Unless we shake up our lives, dig up our issues, and offer ourselves something to feed our roots, we too cannot flourish.

Today's reading is to challenge our beliefs, hopes, and illusions that there is some all-knowing, all-powerful, Big Other, Magical Other, out there who, if I just believe, pray, and behave rightly, will make sure none of that happens to me or those I care about. Today we are called to recognize the contradiction that our notions of fairness; that you get what you deserve; the good will be rewarded; and the bad will be punished; is not what God intends. He has given us an abundant creation and each other. What we do with ourselves and that creation is another question.

Today we are reminded of our mortality and that life is fragile, short, and uncertain. Jesus is calling us to repent, but that isn't about undoing or redoing the past. It's about how we want to live this moment, the next, and the one after that. Reimagine your life. Reimagine your relationships. Reimagine how you might live beside and respond to the tyrants, fallen towers, and tragedies in your life and world. What do you see? What does all that look like? What is it asking of you? What do you need to do, change, reclaim, or let go of in order to start living your reimagined life today? How do you bring the kingdom of God into your heart?

And this is the work of Lent. The long and the short of it is this. All our lives have periods of unearthing, and maybe God has added a little manure. Let that shaking-up, the adding of difficulty, and the mercy of patience, feed us to believe in hope and thus the producing of new fruit. Amen.