

Lent3_YrC_030710
All Saints Episcopal Church

*Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. Isaiah 55:6-7*

Today's Gospel lesson is a little strange and confusing. These verses are only found in Luke's Gospel, no others. It begins with a group of people coming to tell Jesus that Pilate had killed some Galileans who were at worship in the Temple, and that he had taken their blood and mixed it with the blood of the sacrifices they had made at the Temple altar. Pilate was not a nice guy.

Jesus asks the group the question that must have been on their minds - if they thought that the murdered people were worse sinners than all other Galileans. Not an unusual question for Jesus to pose, I guess. Back in the day the idea was that if Israel did things right, things would go well, but if Israel did not do right, then tragedy would follow. This applied on a personal as well as a national level. Bad things don't happen to good people; bad things happen to bad people.

Jesus follows up with another example: a tower had collapsed, killing 18 people; were those 18 people worse sinners than others? "Not at all," Jesus says again. "Don't look for cause and effect explanations." And he calls for the people to repent - to turn and move in a new direction - to turn away from thinking of suffering as punishment for sin - to think for themselves - to change their minds.

We all want to know why this or that has happened to us. We want to make sense of senseless situations. Unfortunately, there are no explanations for many of the bad things that happen. We can blame ourselves, we can blame others, we can blame God, we can even blame global warming, but in the end, none of those reasons holds up. To paraphrase my mother's favorite bumper sticker, "stuff happens." The tragedies and accidents that take place, whether in the first or the 21st centuries, are not God's judgment on us, despite the rantings of Jerry Falwell after 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, or Pat Robertson's after the earthquake in Haiti. We have Jesus' word.

Which brings us to the next part of today's Gospel - the story of the fig tree. A landowner has had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. That was not, apparently, an

unusual thing to do back in the day. The fig tree was supposed to bear fruit after three years, according to the tag on the tree in the garden department at Lowe's. So the gardener planted it and three years went by. According to some writers, it wasn't until after this time that the landowner started counting, waiting three more years for the fig tree to produce its delicious fruit. When it did not bear any, the landowner stomped out to the vineyard to demand that the gardener cut it down.

Now fig trees planted in the arid land of Israel require a lot of resources, particularly water. It made sense that if this tree was not doing its job - not 'being what it was supposed to be' - then it should be cut down so as not to waste anymore water or let it continue to use the nutrients in the soil that were already hard to come by. But the gardener asks the landowner to give the tree one more year - to let him work the soil around the tree, to prune it, to give it another chance to bear fruit.

That, my friends, is called grace. And this grace applies equally to everything - fig trees AND all of us! God does not give up on a fig tree that is just hanging around wasting soil. And God does not give up on us, either, even if we are not producing fruit. The patient and grace-filled hand that reaches out to stop the ax that will cut us down at the roots is the merciful hand of God who will not give up on the barren and the broken. And that should give us hope.

Jesus told the parable of the fig tree to call his listeners to turn towards him and to change their minds and hearts. The result for the fig tree and for the listeners would be the same: to bear fruit. The hope for the fig tree is that it will bear delicious figs. The hope for the human beings who would hear Jesus' words is the same: that they would bear fruit, that they would be who they are supposed to be.

How do we know if we are bearing fruit? The ultimate sign of our repentance, our changing of the mind, our turning in a new direction, is the action of our life. It is not words. It is not sentiment. It is not feelings. It is action. We cannot stand around wasting soil, as it were. We are not called just to be here. Garrison Keillor says, "You can become a Christian by going to church just about as easily as you can become an automobile by sleeping in a garage." God seeks more from us: actions of faith, actions of hope, actions of love. The fruits that we bear as a result of changing our direction - both as individuals and as communities - are actions rooted in faith - actions of generosity, compassion, service, peace-making, justice, witness

and respect. Actions of restoration, renewal and reconciliation for the world around us.

During this Lenten time, let us look at our lives and dare to ask ourselves the hard questions: Am I stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Do I refuse to believe that I can be forgiven, carrying from year to year a growing burden of guilt? Am I so busy making a living that I've forgotten to make a life? Jesus the gardener digs at us with questions like these. Jesus the gardener digs at our hearts in the outstretched hand of every homeless beggar on the streets, of every child not fed. "What have you done?" Jesus asks, and "What have you left undone?" Such questions, like this parable of the fig tree, move us to turn around, to believe things can be different, to trust that the one who calls us to turn around will be there even when we fail.

God will never give up on us.

May God, whose patience goes far beyond the mistakes we make, dig around our hearts and open us to God's wisdom, forgiveness and grace, today and always.
AMEN.