

LENT THREE, YEAR C, MARCH 20, 2022

Why is the Covid pandemic lasting so long? Why is there another variant we have to deal with? Why have so many people died from Covid? Why are there tyrants raging war just because they can? Why are thousands of young people in our country depressed and anxious? Why is there so much disease, famine and natural disasters? All these questions come down to one basic question that the human spirit cries out in the face of illness, violence and tragedy, Why?

I have a friend who I grew up with at St. Peter's in Clifton. In her early 20's Martha married and had two sons. Her youngest son Philip was born with a congenital heart defect and died at the age of seven. Her marriage was abusive and after her son died she divorced. She then continued her education and several years later Martha was ordained in the Episcopal Church. She also eventually remarried. Four years ago, as she was planning to retire and travel with her husband, he became ill and died. Now just this week her 51 year old oldest son also passed away. So, I echo those words why? Why should one person have so much tragedy in their life?

I suppose to ask "why" is to be human. We can't help ourselves; we want to understand. We want to make sense of the world. We want our lives to be logical, reasonable, orderly, sane. So, we ask why. What is the cause of all this suffering, all this evil in the human family? When bad things happen, is it because God has it in for certain individuals or groups? And when things go exceedingly well for certain individuals or groups does God favor them? Those certainly are not new questions, are they? In fact, they are among the most ancient of questions to puzzle the human intellect and trouble our spirits.

In today's Gospel reading there had been two high profile disasters locally. There had been a massacre in the Temple at Jerusalem, and there had also been a terrible accident. A tower had collapsed killing eighteen people. Why they asked Jesus. Jesus responded by asking them, "So, what do you make of these things?" "Do you think these people who died were worse sinners than any of the other people who live around here?"

It is a nearly universal question to ask. "Why did tragedy strike these people, this household, this community?" It is the primary question raised in the Old Testament book of Job. One day when the disciples came upon a blind man begging by the roadway, their question to Jesus was "who sinned – this man, or his parents – that he was born blind?" The question assumes, as many people do today, that there is some direct correlation between sin and tragedy.

To those disciples of Jesus and to the people who asked the question in our reading today, Jesus denied that there is any such correlation. But we still keep asking the question, don't we? Illness, poverty, disease, war, loneliness, death: they are all looked upon by some as punishment for some sin or something known or unknown.

We say, "People get what they have coming to them". If something happens – "Well, they were just asking for it." It's called blaming the victim, and it is a pretty powerful and widespread attitude of the human heart. We even do it to ourselves when something terrible happens to us: "What have I done to deserve all this?" Or we fall prey to these platitudes when the unspeakable happens. We say; "This is part of God's plan." "God is growing your character through this tragedy." "Don't worry, God never gives anyone more than they can bear." "Buck up — other people have it worse."

Jesus rejects this kind of moral calculation. His answer to these questions and platitudes is “NO.” “I tell you, no!” It isn’t that simple. We have to realize that those who suffer are not worse offenders than the rest of us, so their suffering can’t lead us to blame them but rather should lead us to self-examination and reflection.

I think we ask these questions because it deflects our attention away from a more fundamental issue – which is our own obligation to live a life of trust, penitence and responsibility without trying to link each of life’s joys and sorrows to the quality of our or someone else’s faithfulness. We do not “earn” our way – for good or for ill – into God’s favor or disfavor. God is with us and for us, in all of our joys and in all of our sorrows. It’s hard for us to realize that God does not keep score on us; God keeps faith with us. Why do we not believe that?

We are so hesitant to believe the good news, and it seems to me that Jesus has a warning for those who would play games with such an “innocent” yet dangerous question that could ostracize someone. Over and over, when he encountered people who wanted to blame the victim – to accuse those who suffer of being especially sinful – Jesus turned the question around and warned that those who judge others will find that same standard being used against them. Or in a more positive vein, we should always be careful to treat others the way we would like to be treated.

It’s pointless to play judgmental and philosophical games with the experiences of life and expect, in the process, either to learn or to explain anything about the ways of God. More to the point, Jesus tells us it is in the discipline of self-examination, no matter what life throws at us, that we learn to trust in the grace of God .

The message is this. We should not waste our time trying to find guarantees of safety from life’s woes. We should not waste our time trying to find the secret sin of others so that we can feel safe because we are not guilty of "that one". We should, instead, focus on our own lives, our own journey of faithfulness.

The purpose in this story is one of repentance. We tend to think of repentance as a change of heart, as a feeling of guilt, as a resolve to avoid "that" behavior or thinking "that" thought or saying "that" word again! That is only a small part of it. To repent means to turn around, and to go in a new direction. Repentance means a change in the focus of one's life. Change your mind” says Jesus. “Change your mind about God and about what God is up to in your lives. Change your mind about the way God works, how God feels about you”

The more crucial question is, in all circumstances of joy and pain, can you trust God to be God? Can you love God without linking God’s love to the good or bad things that come your way in life? There are no easy answers to life's tough questions. The Church of Jesus Christ is not built upon easy answers. Instead, it is built upon a singular recognition that in the presence of the God we know in Christ we get a God whose love in our lives challenges and enables us to live without all the answers, a God who is willing to dig around our hearts, patiently encouraging us toward repentance and faithfulness and fruitfulness. We get a God who has given God's whole life to us, so that we might come to learn how to give our lives to God more fully.

The parable of the fig tree in essence tells us that we worship a God who wills blessings for us, not tragedy; we worship a God who gives second chances; we worship a God of life. As children of God we should focus on God’s faithfulness to us and our faithfulness to God. If you want to see the hand and face of God when suffering and

disaster strike, the place to look is not at the events themselves. Look, instead, to the faces and hands of those who inevitably reach out to offer compassion, companionship, assistance and sympathetic care. Look into the faces of the volunteers who go to the site of a tornado or flood or fire. The compassion of those who staff food lines at soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Look at the outpouring of love, sympathy and compassion in the face of human suffering especially what is happening now in Ukraine. It is in that company that you will see the face of God.

We have a choice. We can sit around looking for the sins of others and blaming others for our lot in life or we can strive for faithfulness, to grow and live each day to its fullest. Every day we are offered a journey and it's a journey of blessing. Let us go in the direction of that way of life, towards the God of love and gracious life who is with us in all things. Amen.