

## Sermon for March 20, 2022

We human beings want explanations for everything, don't we? I faced my own desire for explanation this past week when I got word of the tragic death of a young woman who had grown up in our church many years ago. She was 36, seemingly in good health, happily married with two little boys, and had a rewarding job as a Spanish immersion teacher. My immediate response was one that may feel familiar to you: what happened? What caused her to die?

In short, what was the rest of the story?

We are faced with the same conundrum in today's Gospel, where Luke gives us only the barest bit of information about something bad that happened to some Galilean folks at the hands of Pontius Pilate. It seemed there was some sort of religious ritual involved. Just as last week's Gospel was about one group of people – some Pharisees – giving Jesus the news that Pilate was out to get him, this week's Gospel is about another group of people giving Jesus the news that Pilate was hurting these Galilean folks. No more information than that.

It's a little surprising that Luke is so thin on the color commentary in this story, we may think. After all, Luke considered himself something of a historian of Jesus' story as he tells us in the beginning of his Gospel. Wouldn't he tell us more?

But perhaps Luke's editorial choice here has something to tell us, even more than details of the story.

Let's think about it. What do we know of the Old Testament understanding of the cause of bad things happening to God's people? Deuteronomy 5:9 and Exodus 24:7 both suggest that any sin of a forebear is a curse that is carried on to the subsequent generations. We see examples of God punishing people for all sorts of reasons: Moses doesn't get to cross over into Canaan because he didn't follow God's instructions about hitting the rock with his stick to generate water for the wanderers in the desert. God allows the Babylonian captivity – Israelites captured and dispersed when they are conquered by another nation – because they have forgotten what it means to be in good relationship with their creator. This notion of sin generating punishment is a familiar one in the Hebrew Bible. Luke knew that, too, as did the audience for which he was writing, and so he didn't need to say more. Everyone would know how things normally worked in this regard.

So imagine, now, that Jesus hears this story about some of his fellow Galileans being killed, people he might even know personally. And the listeners in that space are all watching how Jesus is going to react. If Jesus is indeed the Son of God, if he is indeed the Messiah, won't he exact punishment on Pilate and the forces of the Roman Empire? Or will he say, "they did something bad, and this was God's own punishment on them." But as is so often the case, Jesus goes in a different direction.

He doesn't ask what happened in detail, as we might, we who are in thrall to the 24 hour news cycle, who want all the answers. Instead, he sees this as a moment where he can share something revelatory about the New Covenant that he brings, supplanting the Old Covenant of bad actions followed by smiting.

Jesus says “never mind the rest of the story. I’ll say upfront that the Galileans may have been sinners, because in fact EVERYONE sins, whether they’re willing to admit it or not. And if we want to spend all our time focusing on what they did wrong, we miss the point. The point is love. People sin. Human beings have free will to make choices, and for all sorts of reasons they will often make the wrong choice, a sinful choice. But here’s the way this works. It’s not about justifying the punishment; it’s about changing the way we think and act and speak and deal with each other so that we don’t do that again. That is what repairs our relationships with the God who created us, and that is the Way of Love.”

And then, just in case they didn’t get the point, he gave them a concrete example which would be familiar to them. You have a fig tree in the garden. Each year, when the time approaches for it to bear fruit, you’re just imagining those sweet, delicious figs. You can actually smell and taste them in your imagination, and you’re really looking forward to it. And then, for the second or third year in a row, the tree develops flowers – a good sign – and everything looks good, but the flowers never turn into the fruit you had expected.

It’s easy to say, “that’s an unproductive fig tree, so let’s chop it down.” You can imagine the listeners to this story all nodding their heads. But Jesus says that the gardener advises giving it another year. He’ll give it some fertilizer, mulch it a little better, and see what happens. Only after it has had the best chance to show it CAN produce good fruit should you decide whether it continues to take up space in the garden or gets chopped down. Even a fig tree gets a chance for redemption.

That new covenant, not an endless cycle of smiting, but an outstretched hand saying “I’ll help you to do better” – isn’t that what we pray for? A chance to do better? Not trying to justify our own sins, or the ones of others, or trying to get proof of what’s really going on, but simply saying “Sin happens. Help me, Lord, to try and do better next time.”

It may not feel as snarkily satisfying as trying to justify our own sins by blaming them on the sins of others, but in our hearts we know that when Jesus offers such a generous gift – the gift of loving forgiveness – it’s time for us to own our own failings and ask for that help from the Lord. This is what Lent is about, friends. Owning our own failures to love each other as Jesus loves us. Asking Jesus’ forgiveness. Asking forgiveness of those whom we have offended. And then asking Jesus to help us do better.

We know what we need to do. Let us pray to have the faith and strength and humility to do it.

Amen.