

Sermon: Lent 3

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Year C

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Our Lenten readings continue about fruitfulness... our concerns about judgment and how to avoid it... and what we... maybe mistakenly bring to our understanding of it all...

Some people told Jesus about Galileans who had come to Jerusalem... and were worshipping... being faithful... probably offering sacrifice for the atonement of their sins... but while they were worshipping... repenting... while they were doing right... they were killed by Pilate's men... and their blood was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices... the people telling Jesus about this must have thought that the Galilean's sins had something to do with their tragic fate... we can imagine them thinking that the Galileans must have been the worst of sinners... so much so... that God not only rejected their sacrifice... but that God used Pilate to sacrifice them instead... it would have been easy for them to believe... that what seemed like random evil... was really the punishing hand of God... and was just carried out by Pilate's men...

Jesus says No. And then he asks them about those who died when the tower fell... did those present think *these people* were worse sinners than everyone else living in Jerusalem... Jesus says No... they were not... Jesus doesn't offer explanations or theological rationales for why evil happens... but he does in effect say... Stop that way of thinking right now!

There were six more shootings this week... six more innocent people died in Kalamazoo... when shootings happen far away... farther away... it's maybe easier... to emotionally distance ourselves from the horror of it all... from the senselessness of it all... easier to tell ourselves there's nothing we can do... but when they happen closer to home... in our city or our neighborhood... when we can't use distance to distance

ourselves... when it's someone we know... we may struggle even more with why these things happen... we tell ourselves that there **has to be** a reason... because without one we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else... and *maybe* some people living in western Michigan... like some of Job's friends... wonder whether these people were worse sinners than others who live in Kalamazoo... they may wonder *maybe* whether God used the shooter... the way those present in the Gospel wondered whether God used Pilate to kill the Galileans...

Kate Bowler is an assistant professor of the history of Christianity in North America at Duke Divinity School... last fall... she got a call from her doctor's office... and was told that the stomach cramps she'd been having weren't from her gallbladder... but from Stage 4 cancer... Kate is thirty-five... she called her husband... and he came home and they held each other and cried and she asked him to take care of their son... but one of the first thoughts she had was about how ironic this seemed... she had after all... just written a book called Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel ... the prosperity gospel is the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith... she wrote: *I went on pilgrimage with the faith healer Benny Hinn and 900 tourists to retrace Jesus' steps in the Holy Land and see what people would risk for the chance at their own miracle. I ruined family vacations by insisting on being dropped off at the showiest megachurch in town. If there was a river running through the sanctuary or an eagle flying freely in the auditorium... I was there...*

"Blessed" is a loaded term because it blurs the distinction between two very different categories: gift and reward. It can be a term of pure gratitude. "Thank you, God. I could not have secured this for myself." But it can also imply that it was deserved. "Thank you, me. For being the kind of person who gets it right." It is a perfect word for an American society that says it believes the American dream is based on hard work and not luck...

A neighbor knocked on their door to tell her husband that everything happens for a reason. "I'd love to hear it," he said. "Pardon?" the startled neighbor said. "I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying," he said.

And Jesus told a parable... a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard... for three years he came looking for fruit on it... and found none... he told the gardener he'd had it... cut it down... why should it be wasting the soil... but the gardener urged... let it alone for one more year... I'll dig around it and fertilize it... and if it doesn't produce next year... you may cut it down... you... not me...

It's may be easy to think that the vineyard owner is God... some commentators think so... but the bigger point here is that Jesus casts himself as the gardener... the underling... the Advocate... he asks for forbearance... he asks that the barren fig tree continue to live by Grace... and the Greek word in the text is *ā-fes*... let it be... let it be... he's willing to dig around it... nurture it... feed it... though in the end... if it really doesn't bear fruit... he refuses to cut it down...

A similar form of this Greek verb appears in the parable in Matthew (13:24-30) about the wheat and the tares... you remember... an enemy has come and sown weeds among the wheat... and the slaves came to the Master and asked *Do you want us to pull up the weeds*... and the answer was... let it be... if you pull what we don't want... you'll also pull some of what we do want... we can deal with it all at the harvest...

Fr. Robert Capon wrote... it's this one Greek word in today's Gospel that makes this gardener the clearest Christ-figure in all the parables... because it's the same word that Jesus... in the very teeth of death... utters on the cross... *ā-fes*... forgive...

But too many don't want to forgive... don't want to let go... post-modern American Christianity has taken an ancient Mystery religion... that's full of being out of control... and molded it into an Industrial Revolution religion that believes it can control... I just found a quote from Richard Rohr that said it well: The opposite of faith isn't doubt... the opposite of faith is control...

And as Kate wrote in her poignant article in the NY Times two weeks ago... the prosperity gospel has taken a religion... based on the insights of a dying man and stripped it of its call to surrender everything... perhaps worse... it has replaced Christian faith with the most painful forms of certainty... the movement has perfected a rare form of America's addiction to self-rule... which denies much of our humanity... our fragile bodies... our finitude... our need to stare down our deaths (at least once in a while)... and to be filled with dread and wonder... she wrote... as a Christian... I can say that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully here... and so we get sick and die... at some point... we must say to ourselves... I'm going to need to let go...

The seed must die to itself in order to create more life... we must repent... we must turn from certainty back to faith... but as long as we strive to feel God's presence... as long as we change our minds and seek the mind of Christ... as long as our branches abide in the vine... our behavior will change and we will bear fruit... but let's remember... it's not our fruit... the fruit is what comes through us...

As I said earlier... it may be easy to think of the vineyard owner as God... and it's the vineyard owner who wants to cut the fig tree down... but that's where the parable may break down... because Fr. Capon reminds us that although the fig tree is located in a vineyard... it's presence suggests that it was planted more out of personal delight... than out of any desire to make a profit... that we were planted more out of God's delight... than with any expectation that we bear fruit... and if we are here out of God's pleasure... if... as we say in the Eucharist... in your infinite love you made us for yourself... then as Capon wrote... God's attitude towards the world involves favor from the start... grace is not something thought up and dragged in later on to patch up messes... unnecessary spontaneous delight is at the very root of God's relationship with creation... and because God loved the world so much... that when we don't produce fruit... or when it's difficult to do so... or when we've reached the end of our growing season... Jesus will dig around us... and put fertilizer on us... and water us...

and sit with us... and forgive us... and love us... but Jesus will not cut us down...
instead... he will raise us to new life...

Mike+