

Message for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year C (3/20/2022)

Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13:1-9

Brazen political violence, senseless tragedy, and a barren fig tree – and it all has something to do with repentance and the threat of perishing. What a perfect Gospel text for Bodhi's baptism day! According to Jesus' parable, the secret to flourishing is to apply a little manure, but if it's ok with you, Dani Jo and Joe, I think we'll stick with water for the baptism today.

I tease, but as is most often the case with holy scripture, there is something in this Gospel from Luke that proclaims a word of hope in spite of uncertainty, mercy in spite of judgment, life in spite of death. As it turns out, this is a story to inform Bodhi's baptism, even if at first it seems like an awkward fit.

I'm grateful, first of all, for the context the prophet Isaiah provides in our first reading today: "Everyone who thirsts, / come to the waters.... / Let [us] return to the LORD, that [the LORD] may have mercy on [us], and to our God, for [God] will abundantly pardon." There's enough for a baptismal sermon right there. Come to the waters – to the fountain of grace, the river of mercy, the source of steadfast love. It's for everyone who needs it; it's for you. That's an invitation for Bodhi in particular today, and for all those preparing for baptism this season – don't stay away, but be drawn in by God's wide welcome; come to the waters!

As we teach in the Lutheran tradition, baptism is the definitive sign of God's promise to love and cherish us no matter what. It's the irrevocable mark of our dignity in God's sight, our fundamental status as children of God. And so, baptism is at the very heart of our faith.

But, the grace of baptism is not a key to unlocking all the mysteries of life; neither is it a guarantee of a carefree existence. This is where the thorny questions that arise in our Gospel from Luke come in. Current events have the people in Jesus' sphere of influence on edge: *What are we to make of Pontius Pilate's brutal attack on Galileans in the temple, or where's the sense in the collapse of the tower of Siloam, such a tragic accident?* In short, *what is the meaning of all the suffering we see?*

And, although it's common both in the ancient world and in ours to hear pat answers to questions like these, Jesus has none to offer. "Do you think that [these people] were worse offenders than all the others..." he asks rhetorically, the answer being a resounding "No." *No*, Jesus insists, *these people did not somehow deserve what they got*. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, puts it plainly: "Jesus says no to simplistic answers to deep and complex questions, no to attempts to solve deep troubles with quick fixes, and no to shallow theological thinking."¹

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 95.

That Jesus refuses to justify oppression and misfortune on theological grounds is itself a testimony to the love of God; as his followers witness over and over, Jesus is inclined to compassion, not condemnation. That's the lesson we might take from the parable that concludes today's Gospel: "Sir," the gardener appeals to the owner of the vineyard he tends, "let [this fruitless fig tree] alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." *One more year, one more chance*. Ultimately, it's a story of hope in spite of uncertainty, mercy in spite of judgment, the possibility of life despite the prospect of death.

Yet, neither the mystery of suffering nor the promise of God's mercy is an excuse for indifference. To quote Bishop Curry again, "Much is unknown. Many questions will remain unanswered. In the end, the future is God's, but we share in the mission of unfolding the future."² That's one way to understand Jesus' emphasis on repentance in our Gospel today. "Repent," he calls out to his listeners; in light of the changes and chances of life, "repent"; because it's not too late to be caught up in God's work to remake the world, "repent." Bear in mind that repentance means more than admitting our shortcomings and banking on God's forgiveness; it implies a change of heart, or reversing course. Repentance means to reorient ourselves toward God and God's vision for the world, trusting that God is already oriented toward us in grace and love.

² Ibid.

And in that sense, repentance is a return to the waters of baptism. Isaiah's invitation to "come to the waters" takes on a new significance, then, for those of us who've been to the font already. Repent; come back to the waters; turn again toward new hope, new mercy, new possibilities for life.

As Bodhi joins us on the baptismal journey today, a journey that will have its inevitable ebbs and flows, we know that very little in life is certain. Still, we trust the promise that, come what may, God will immerse us again and again in God's mercy and sweep us up into new life.

"As every parent knows," writes Danielle Shroyer in our Lenten devotional book, *Original Blessing*, "you can't shield your children from the realities of life forever.... At some point, we [all] see the world for what it really is, a perplexing knot of good and evil, blessing and curse, God and not-God.

What we need to know most of all as we embark [on the journey] is that we come from a place of safe loving-care, with a Divine Parent who loves us and is faithful to us, a God to whom we can always come home."³

³ 103, 106.