

### 3 Lent, Year C: 3 March 2013

You've heard me say before that I consider the author of Luke a master story-teller. Well, I do think that, but I also think that he—or someone—is a lousy editor. Because once again in today's gospel two distinct and unrelated messages are lumped together back-to-back: the teaching about God's role in disaster and the parable of the fig tree. Maybe I should blame the framers of the lectionary, who could have made it easier and separated these things. But they didn't, which means that I'm faced with the daunting task of delivering two mini-sermons or of mostly ignoring the one-half of the reading that half of you were wanting me to say more about! So let me just say that while I'm not at all sure why Luke placed these two stories together, I'm going to do my best to connect them. And here goes.

Open the newspaper, turn on the television, listen to the radio, pull up your favorite home page and it probably bears some bad news for you. As if we didn't have enough to worry about in our own lives, the worries of the world stream into our living rooms and kitchens every day. It's not as if these stories are untrue. Instead, the difficult part is that so much tragedy is all too real: the potentially crippling sequester, American drones flying in and out of Niger, Iran's growing nuclear capability, recurring bloodshed in Syria, what seems to be an increasing incidence of natural disasters. Then there's the private news we have to face. If you can handle the world-affecting issues, the personal ones have their own ability to leave us disappointed: poor health, family squabbles, professional setbacks, unreliable friends. Life, or our experience of it, often disappoints. In the face of all this it's only human to ask the dreaded question: "Why?" It just doesn't seem fair. Why does God let such things happen? Why Sandy Hook and not Hermantown? What does anyone do to deserve such tragedy?

This isn't a new question, of course. Luke portrays Jesus as dealing with just this issue in the first half of the reading for today. You probably remember that the logic at the time was that any misfortune to strike must somehow be tied to sin.

That's how people explained the world in those days.  
The evangelist, however, wants to say otherwise.  
So he has Jesus make it quite clear:  
No, God does not punish us or test us by throwing tragedy upon us.  
God doesn't play it like that.

That's great good news,  
but as a reader—maybe even as a believer—I'm frustrated  
that Luke doesn't take the teaching any further:  
he doesn't have Jesus go on to speculate on the deep secrets of the universe,  
to give an explanation for why a loving God doesn't prevent or magically repair  
all the world's pain and injustice.  
In fact, Jesus' response to the calamities he cites is not exactly comforting.  
Instead of sympathy for "*those poor people*," we get urgency: "*it might have been you*."  
Jesus doesn't downplay life's tendency to deal harsh hands.  
He essentially asks, "Why should any of you survivors sleep easier tonight?  
Oh, and by the way, if you don't repent, you will all perish just as they did."

This may be the evangelist's script, but that certainly sounds like Jesus alright,  
never one for the easy answer.  
No, but... That's not the answer, but you're not off the hook either.  
Repentance, by the way, is very much the message of Jesus according to Luke.  
Nearly one half, or twenty-five of the fifty-eight New Testament uses of the term  
are found in the books of Luke and Acts.  
Contrast that with the Fourth Gospel, which never uses the term once.  
Repent. Repent or you will perish. Repent, all of you, repent.

Luke pairs this cheery line of teaching with a story about an unproductive fig tree  
given one more chance to realize its purpose.  
I said earlier that I wasn't sure why Luke had paired these up –  
and I trust the experts when they say that it is Luke, not Jesus, who does this—  
but really I think the parable clarifies Jesus' motivations in calling people to "repent."  
Remember that repentance, by its basic definition, means to "turn around."  
And in Luke, not only to turn around, but to turn and look at the world in a new way.  
It's not that repenting will extend our lives or offer a miraculous shield  
against tyrants, superstorms, computer hackers, and disease.  
Rather, our repentance will lead, figuratively, to our bearing fruit.  
True living is about fruition, coming to the place of experiencing God's intentions for us  
even in the midst of a sometimes menacing universe.

Somehow most people hear "repentance" and think first of *behavior* and *guilt*.  
As if the primary goal was to reform personal morality.  
But this is to misunderstand repentance.  
At its root the word is about *thinking* and *perception*.  
It refers to a wholesale change in how a person understands something.  
Repentance as a changed mind, as a willingness to adopt a new perspective.

It implies an utter reconfiguration of our perspective on reality and meaning, including (in Luke certainly) a reorientation of ourselves toward God. Our behavior might change as a result of this new perception, but repentance first involves seeing things differently and coming to a new understanding of what God makes possible.

The evangelist tells us that Jesus promises an alternate perspective on the cycles of violence, pain, and meaninglessness.

To miss out on this way of seeing – to neglect to “repent” – is to miss out on other dimensions of our existence.

It is to pass by our purpose.

The summons to repent is not escapism or a minimization of life’s hardships.

It is a call to discover God as the source of sustenance, belonging, meaning, and hope in this difficult life and into future existence.

Repentance names the change that occurs within us when God meets us and reshapes our understanding.

Repentance results from an encounter with God.

This is why in Luke’s gospel a person’s “repentance” is regularly associated with the essentially receptive experience of being found and reclaimed by someone who seeks you intently.

What are the things you want to be different from how they currently are?

What global issues and personal struggles erode your capacity for hope?

Jesus doesn’t promise to change the world by providing instant relief.

His coming did not put an end to tyrants

or stop buildings and meteorites from falling upon random passers-by.

But he does offer a new perspective on what’s possible for us and for our world.

He insists God can be encountered, even within this fragile human existence.

Indeed, especially in the stuff of this fragile human existence.

Elsewhere the New Testament makes it clear:

this new perspective is not about passivity or resigning oneself to life’s afflictions.

Nor is repentance a tool for seizing control over the universe to tame its vicious streak.

It is a way of aligning ourselves with the God who cares for all creation

and wishes to enlist our help in ushering in newness, relief, and justice.

Repenting entails trust.

It entails trust in God, yes, but also trust that, because of God’s commitment to us, what we read in the news does not capture the full extent of any story.

Every disappointing news item includes a summons to look and work for God’s grace, mercy, and justice,

even if those things linger slightly hidden below the fold.

So in the end, when it comes to today's seemingly incongruous pairing  
I think we have a choice:  
as a gloss on the theme of repentance  
we could read the parable as a threat —  
there's only one year left, you better get things right.  
Or we can see it as an invitation — to work at the soil, to dig at our hearts,  
to turn away from those things that keep us from God  
and turn towards a new way of looking at the world.  
But in either case, the beautiful thing about this parable  
is that the fig tree isn't in it alone.  
The gardener helps.  
The gardener wants us to live.