

“The Whys of Lent”

For those who have ever been around young children there is a certain age when their favorite thing to ask is “Why?” Their question may be simple or it may be impossible to answer. The “whys” can come fast and furious such that the exasperated adult might respond with, “Because I say so.” In family situations the flustered parent might respond by saying, “I don’t know. Go ask your mother/father.”

Today we heard Jesus presented with the age-old question of, “Why do bad things happen?” and in particular “Why do bad things happen to good people.” For example, we might think it is ok for a dictator to be the victim of a violent rebellion, after all they have hurt many people in the course of their rule. But when it is a team serving with Doctors Without Borders we wonder what the world is coming to that those doing good are killed in the process of doing good.¹

In the two instances in our Gospel passage were going to Temple to make a sacrifice or people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Conventional thinking during Jesus’ time was that they must have done something to deserve these calamities. God was punishing them for their transgressions. Perhaps it is no surprise that we often think similarly now. Some will think that God is punishing sinners, while others will think that someone who has bad fortune did something to bring it on themselves. Such as they contracted the dread disease because of their behaviors. They were injured because they took risks. “What did they expect ____”. You fill in the blank.

Jesus, as he is want to do, responds with a question, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” and “...do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” No, I tell you” His answer is a resounding “No.” The implication being that God does not act in this way.

Then Jesus tells them a parable that seems like a non sequitur. After all, what does a story about a fruit tree have to do with the disastrous things that the people ask him about? Jesus is saying that the people are not asking the right question. Bad things happen. The question is not why bad things happen. Rather the question is where we find God in times of disaster and trial.

A fruit tree has not borne fruit in three years. Most fruit bearing plants will bear fruit by the third year. It may not be the best fruit, but it does start bearing. Because it has not borne fruit the landowner tells his vineyard keeper to cut it down. The gardener sees the tree and asks for permission to give it one more year during which he will give it special attention. This is a simple enough request, but not a smart agricultural move. If it has not borne fruit it is unlikely to do so even with special care. Jesus wants us to know that God will give special care to us even when we do not bear fruit in due season and others think we are hopeless.

Reflecting back on the Moses story from Exodus we see God’s care and mercy in action. Moses was born of Hebrew parents in Egypt. Pharaoh had ordered the killing of all male Hebrew babies, but through the deception of midwives Shiphrah and Puah²

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/17/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-aid-workers-killed.html?searchResultPosition=1>

² Two Hebrew midwives who were instructed to kill Jewish male children by Pharaoh but refused. They used a clever ruse that played on Egyptian stereotypes of the Jews. Exodus 1:15-21.

and by the cleverness of Moses' sister he ends up being reared in Pharaoh's household.³ When he reached maturity he began to identify with his enslaved Hebrews brethren. When he sees an Egyptian overseer mistreating one of the Hebrew slaves, he kills him and flees Egypt fearing for his life. He settles in the land of Midian and becomes a shepherd for Jethro the priest of Midian whose daughter he marries. Through this entire saga it would seem that Moses is being prepared for something special and protected from harm in order to fulfill that promise.

Moses had run away from his people and sought anonymity and safety in the wilderness. He needed a burning bush to get his attention; who knows how many other signs he had ignored. Once he attends to the bush he hears God's call. It is a call he tries to resist, but God won't let him. Like the fig tree God has broken up the soil and fertilized Moses for the task of leading his people out of captivity. An aimless shepherd hiding from the world had a fire lit under him, so to speak, and he becomes the inspired and fearless leader of his people.

Like Moses, God gives us opportunities. They may be opportunities for greatness, or service, or repentance, or bliss. But we do not know what those opportunities are unless we attend to our burning bush and the call to walk carefully on holy ground. Jesus reminds us that like those victims of disaster and murder, our time is finite and putting off a relationship with God for another day is not a good plan. Towers may fall and dictators may instigate wars and massacres, whether their name is Pilate or Putin.

Take care of your soul now so that you are prepared for the unexpected. Lent calls us to return to the Lord. Use this season wisely. Lent is about way more than ashes, sackcloth and giving up chocolate. Lent is about getting into something big. That is God who is richer and more fulfilling than anything we give up.

³ Exodus 2:1-10