I was looking at Facebook the other day when I probably should have been catching up on something important. Some of the memes, the little cartoons and sayings that people post are pretty funny and often very poignant. The one that caught my attention that particular day was sadly reflective of the beginning of the passage from Luke’s gospel this morning. It said, *“The fact that your train wreck of a life is worse than my train wreck of a life is strangely comforting.”*

This is the impression I got when I was picturing people coming to Jesus to tell him the stories of two tragedies that were on everyone’s lips. Evidently, they had heard the news of the soldiers who served the vicious and ever crueler Pontius Pilate that had slaughtered worshippers in Jerusalem. The blood of the faithful had been mixed with that of the sacrifice they were offering to God. And if that were not enough terrifying news, a section of a tower had fallen, killing eighteen people. Now, there are no recorded historical events that match these accounts in Luke, but there is no doubt that this was a time of unrest, uncertainty and fear in the region.

I think about how frightening this must have been for people to hear. Worshippers murdered, sudden and disastrous accidents. People must have been thinking…How can this be?…Could these things happen to somebody I know, someone I love? Could the tragedy and senseless violence come to my house?

It was a common belief in the ancient world that when bad things happened, it was likely the result of some sin that was committed. So the Galileans that came to Jesus repeated the stories they heard and they most likely wondered what the victims did to deserve their fates.

It reminds us of the story of poor faithful and blameless Job, whose friends came to “help” him after he has lost everything. They said,

*“Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?*

*As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.*

*At the breath of God they perish; at the blast of his anger they are no more.” (Job 4: 7-9, NIV)*

In other words, brother Job, you must have done something really bad to deserve this calamity!

So, when these people come to Jesus, they are looking for …..what? – Reassurance that this won’t happen to them? ….. Confirmation that they are in the clear? …What are we looking for when we come to God troubled by our own fears of falling victim to disasters, cruelty, oppression and terror? Like us, they would like for God to give us some explanation for the chaos that exists in this world, in God’s world.

But, Jesus does not respond with the reassuring pastoral tone that we, and, I’m certain, his listeners are looking for. He says, *“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all others?” and “Do you think that because a tower fell on the eighteen that were killed that they were worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem?” (Lk 13: 2,4 NSRV)*

At first thought, we might consider the people’s reaction to these tragic and troubling incidents as simply an expression of a theology from long ago. And, I don’t believe that “blaming the victim” is a practice that is unfamiliar to us in our own time. Haven’t you ever thought, “God, what did I ever do to deserve that?” And sadly, we have heard terribly cruel and evil vitriol from preachers who attempt to scapegoat entire groups of people, blaming them for inciting God’s wrath after environmental disasters.

I mean, it could easily be us talking with each other over a cup of coffee about a troubling situation or tragedy we heard about on the news, ……and then someone wonders aloud what the victim may have done or said to bring misfortune, injury or even death upon themselves. Hey, maybe we don’t say it out loud. Perhaps we only think it to ourselves. “What was she thinking, walking at night all by herself?”, “What was he doing selling cigarettes on a street corner?” or, “If only he wasn't wearing a hoodie and waving that cell phone around like that.”

And perhaps, we say to ourselves, as I know I have, “There but for the grace of God, go I.”

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, *“Frankly, if God was in the business of meting out judgment and curses related to our sins, there would not be anyone left on the planet. In this text, Jesus is saying 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]](#footnote-1)*

So, to answer his own questions, Jesus says, *“I tell you, NO; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” (Lk 13: 3,5)* Wow! This is a complete shift in focus from where we are sitting. Those who died are no better or worse sinners than we are. The “them” we have been trying to distance ourselves from is “US”! We too, are the ones in need of repentance, and SOON!

The path of repentance that Jesus calls us to is **metanoia**, the Greek term Luke uses, defined as a *“transformative change of heart, a redirection or turning of thought.”*

Metanoia is an invitation for us. Here is a message born out of the love that God has for us. God loves us too much to let us stagnate and squander the promise of the Kingdom in the here and now. And, Jesus is telling us straight up….Do not mistake your own good fortune for evidence of God’s special blessing. Don’t waste precious time looking for affirmations and assurances of our own status quo. It is an invitation to pray,….. to ask God, what it is are we to turn away from and to what and whom will we turn?

Jesus is the old grizzled man standing on the corner with the placard that calls for repentance. It says METANOIA NOW! Turn NOW! Seek out God’s redirecting and transforming Spirit NOW! Lent is our time to be asking, “Where does God long for ME to turn?” “How does the Spirit call ME to grow?” “What fruit am I to yield in this moment in time?

Speaking of fruit, let’s take a moment to consider the fig tree.

It hasn’t produced any fruit in three years. The owner of the vineyard where the fig tree is planted is ready to uproot it and plant something that will bring forth harvest. For some reason, the gardener isn’t ready to give up on the unproductive plant and asks for a little more time to try something else.

It’s not clear to me if the fig tree has been given much in the way of individual tending thus far from the story we are given. Perhaps it received no more or less than the vines around it that seem to be doing OK.

We all have times when we are not producing much in the way of fruit in the Creator’s garden. And I know that there have been times when what I have to give is less than God has intended for me. I imagine you have experienced those periods as well. For me, successfully recovering and reviving from those low times have always been as a result of the additional tending and nourishment from the people that God has so generously placed in my life.

It’s clear that God is being generous in granting what is unproductive an additional year to get it together. The gardener is there to provide the additional attention and nourishment. But delay does not mean that judgment will not come again. Friends let us guard against falling into focusing on the quality and quantity of another person’s fruit, rather than our own. Fruitfulness will not come by our individual efforts to produce. The most meaningful and fulfilling Lenten journeys include a knowledge of being fed and nourished in the abundance of God’s mercy, justice, grace and forgiveness.

Michael Curry reminds us that we labor toward a future we do not know. The gardener in this parable does not control the outcome any more than does the fig tree. Our Creator is master of the garden after all. God loves us enough to forgive us when we fall short, and to pull us back into the most holy embrace. And God loves us enough and to turn us about, transform our hearts, and send us out in the name of the Son.

This is the gift of Grace. Turn, and accept the gift.

1. Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2. Lent through Eastertide. p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)