

**Sunday, March 23, 2025**  
**Third Sunday in Lent (Year C)**

Luke 13.1-9

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1360350978413460>

*(Sermon begins at about 27:40)*

**“Opportunity for Repentance”**

Why do bad things happen? Such a broad and complex topic. Of course, the answer—if there even is a correct answer—depends on perspective. Depends on the lens through which one chooses to evaluate the particular circumstances of any given situation. As our understanding of the universe has increased, the range of possible answers seem to broaden rather than narrow. The whole notion of quantum physics alone throws such a monkey wrench into the works that an absolute answer may never be found.

For the ancients, with a much simpler worldview—and even for many in our own day—the answer is clear. Bad things happen because the gods—or, in our case, the One God—was angry. Bad things happen because of God’s wrath. Suffering was often viewed as punishment for sin. Even when bad things happened to those who were apparently good and righteous, there must have been some hidden sin, some unknown transgression, that was being punished. And in some cases, if there was no actual transgression, the punishment must have been for a sin committed by a parent or ancestor or other relative. Right in Exodus, when God gives the Ten Commandments to Moses, God specifically says, “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquities of parents, to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me” (Ex 20.5b). Although, this is also countered elsewhere in Scripture. And yet, this perspective continued—and continues—in a generalized form, of suffering being the wages for sin.

This was the worldview that Jesus tackles head-on in today’s Gospel reading. This passage is part of a longer discussion in which Jesus has been dealing with the issue of sin and repentance. And particularly the urgency for repentance. He tells a variety of stories to illustrate his point; such as the parable of the rich fool, the parable of the watchful slaves, the parable of the faithful and unfaithful slaves. After hearing these stories about the urgency of repentance, some in the crowd bring up an incident—obviously breaking news at the time, yet lost to the annals of history—of “Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” Based on context, we can deduce that some Galilean pilgrims were in the temple in Jerusalem offering sacrifices when they were slaughtered by Roman soldiers. Slaughtered like the sacrificial lambs that were being offered at the temple altar. The blood of these innocent victims being mingled with the blood of the sacrificed animals, desecrating the altar. The implied question being: “Those slaughtered were, by virtue of making their sacrifices at the temple, ritually cleansed of their sins. Why then, were they made to suffer? Surely this was punishment for some unknown sin.” Those telling the story perhaps viewed themselves as righteous. Certainly, more righteous than those who were slaughtered.

Having none of that, Jesus responds, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you.” He goes on to bring up another event—again, apparently well-known at the time, yet lost to history—in which eighteen people were killed when the tower of Siloam, a tower in the city wall around Jerusalem, collapsed. Was this punishment for their transgressions? Again, Jesus issues an emphatic, “No, I tell you.”

Although, in true Jesus-fashion, there is a “but.” “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Not that they will perish because of their sins. But rather, that these died unexpectedly, under tragic circumstances. The implication being that they did not die because of sin, but that they died without the opportunity to repent of their sins. Sure, some may have been offering ritual sacrifices at the time of their deaths, but had they truly repented?

As we’ve talked a number of times—including just two weeks ago when we talked about John the Baptist on the first Sunday in Lent, repentance is about more than just being sorry for our sins. It is about more than making some token, ritual sacrifice as a means of seeking God’s forgiveness. The Greek word for repentance, the word Jesus uses here, is *metanoia*, which literally means “change of mind.” The true meaning of the repentance Jesus is preaching is a complete turning around of our lives, away from whatever it is that results in us sinning in the first place. A turning away from an old way of life and turning toward a new way of life. A way of life focused on living in accordance with God’s laws.

In responding with “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did”, in returning to this deeper meaning of repentance, Jesus is not blaming the victims of these tragedies in the temple and at the tower of Siloam. He is merely observing that they did not have the opportunity to make a true repentance, a true turning around, a true conversion of life. They were deprived of the joy of a new and transformed life in alignment with God’s will. Rather than question why such tragedies happen; rather than question whether the victims were righteous or not; such events should serve as a reminder that life is uncertain and unpredictable. A reminder that we should never put off until tomorrow what we can do today. Particularly not something as important as repenting; something as important as turning our lives around; something as important as turning toward our loving God. Jesus is urging his audience—and us—to take an active role in our redemption. To do the hard work of turning our lives around. Not at some point in the future, when it might be more convenient, but NOW.

Again, there is another “but.” Yes, while it is advisable to repent and turn our lives around when we become aware of our need to do so, sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes it takes time to come to the realization we need to make a change. Sometimes it takes time to discern just what repentance, what turning around, entails. Even then, sometimes it takes time, and even courage, and certainly strength, to even begin to make necessary changes. So are we vulnerable to punishment during this time of realization, discernment, soul-searching, and transformation?

To illustrate this, Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. Using the image of the fig tree bearing fruit—or not—as the image for our own process toward repentance. Bearing fruit being the outward sign that we have begun to live more fully into who God desires us to be; to live more fully as God would have us live our lives. As we heard in the parable, the landowner is ready to

cut down the fig tree that has not produced fruit. Why keep it around if it isn't doing what it is supposed to do. Better to make room for those who will bear fruit. The gardener begs the landowner to allow him to give it a little extra TLC and see what happens. The overarching message is that, contrary to popular belief of Jesus' original audience—and sometimes even our own—divine wrath is not inevitable. There is room for grace. That judgment is tempered by divine mercy.

In this parable, it would be easy to view the landowner as God. After all, in many such parables, the landowner is meant to represent God. But I think not in this parable. In the parable, the landowner is hasty, insistent: "Cut it down!" Is that who God is? As Jesus would say, "No, I tell you." In this case, it would be reasonable to assume the landowner is not God but rather the presumption of God's impending wrath that is prevalent in society—in Jesus' time and even ours. Presumptions that are insistent on having God mete out punishment for sin. The gardener, who could be viewed as an image for Jesus most certainly, and even for who God truly is, is the One willing to extend extra love, care, and nurture when and where needed. All in an effort to give the fig tree—to give each of us—the love and care, the time and resources, we need to turn around; to live more fully into who we can and are meant to be. To begin to bear the fruit that is a sign of a redeemed and transformed life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus seeks to disabuse his audience of commonly held beliefs regarding God's judgment, particularly as related to sin and punishment. The notion that suffering is punishment for sin. Sometimes things happen, tragic though they may be. And while not to be viewed as punishment, such events do contain a message, nonetheless. Serving as a reminder of the fragility and uncertainty of our lives. Reminding us of the importance of being proactive and taking the opportunity, sooner rather than later, to begin the work of repentance. The work of turning our lives toward God and living more fully into who God is calling us to be. To live more fully in accordance with God's will.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the parable of the fig tree is that the gardener does not give up on the tree, even when it does not meet expectations. That God and Jesus do not give up on us when we fail to meet expectations. They do what it takes to give us more time, to help us come along in our own work of repentance. Furthermore, Jesus assures us that as we undertake this work, we are not alone. He assures us that he and God are with us in the process. Providing us with the love and grace, with the care and nurture, with the support and encouragement, that we need to be transformed and to begin to bear the fruit of repentance.

While anytime is the right time for engaging in the hard work of repentance, such work is particularly appropriate during Lent. The season when we intentionally focus on our humanity, our frailty, our flawed-ness, our sinfulness. Sober recognition that we are sorely in need of something greater than ourselves if we are to truly be redeemed and transformed into who we are created and called to be. As we approach our annual celebration of the ultimate acts of redemption and transformation, we have an opportunity, through our repentance, to prepare ourselves to receive the gift that will be offered in a few weeks' time.