



Sunday Messages at Scarboro United Church

Lent 3

(Based on Luke 13.1-9)

March 24, 2019

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Here we have Jesus, doing his thing - preaching, teaching, healing, etc... As he is preaching and teaching, some folks draw his attention to others who were killed while they were at worship.

And this hurts our hearts in light of what happened in Christchurch just last week. Peaceful, innocent people at worship, intentionally attacked. 50 people between the ages of 3 and 77, dead.

What the people of Jesus' time want to know is: did they do something to deserve this?

In our hearts, we know that the answer to this question is a clear and decisive

NO.

What about the people in Siloam, who perished when the tower collapsed?

What about the people of Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, devastated by Cyclone Idai?

To date, 440 people have perished, 3000 square kilometers are underwater, and somewhere between 500,000 and 1.7 million people will need help.

Jesus tells us what we already know deep in our hearts. No one deserves this. There was nothing that any of these perfectly normal people could have done to have caused such tragedy.

If anything, they point out the ways in which our society is broken.

A natural disaster is not a disaster for nature, much of it is what happens as part of our planet's life cycle. Then, there are the parts caused by our impact on the planet; pollution and climate change come to mind. The disaster happens in the effect on humanity, the collapse of infrastructure, which can sometimes be traced directly back to the structural inequality in our social systems.

Peaceful people slaughtered while they gather to sing and pray (not unlike what we are doing today) are victims not only of an intentional act of aggression and oppression, but also of the rise of racism, Islamophobia, and white supremacy.

But these are all things that we already know.

As did the folks who approached Jesus. They came to him with questions, wanting to confirm what they wanted to believe. That suffering is related to sinfulness, and bad things only happen to bad people. The problem with such an approach is that it seeks to separate us from not only suffering but those who are suffering.

I really appreciate the way that Debie Thomas phrases this in her essay for Journey With Jesus. In asking "why?" or coming up with platitudes, what we are really trying to do is: inoculate ~~us~~-(ourselves) from

the searing work of solidarity, empathy, and compassion. They keep(ing) us from embracing our common lot, our common brokenness, our common humanity.¹

Jesus is asking us to literally change our minds in how we think about tragedy. He calls us to repent. The word is *metanoia*. It is Greek and combines the concepts of time and change, meaning to “think differently after.”

Instead of looking for easy answers, any answers, we need to think to change our minds. Instead of offering platitudes, or theories, Jesus is calling us to engage in the story. Engage with one another. To illustrate this, he tells the story of a tree. A landowner has a fig tree that is not producing any fruit, and is fed up with not seeing any results. They want to cut their losses, and cut the tree down. The gardener instead asks for more time and offers more effort. A second chance. Grace.

This story is sometimes seen as an allegory. With the God as the landowner, ourselves as the fig trees, and Jesus as the gardener, asking for and offering us a second chance. Which is fine, but Jesus offers us more than this.

In regard to this story, perhaps we should change our thinking. Repent, if you will.

What if we are the landowners, and God is the gardener?

God’s world is the fig tree that we are being asked to not give up on. God knows that this world can be so much more than what we are seeing, and can be fruitful and life giving for all people. Through Jesus, God is asking us to take an active part in redemptive transformation. To dig in and do the hard labour of standing up to racism and hatred wherever we encounter it. To unpack our own privilege. And, that work might stink. Like spreading manure stinks. It will be dirty and messy and hard, to unlearn things that we have come to accept, the empire in which we exist, the impacts that our action or inaction has. We will have to get to know one another, engage in story and life together.

When we want to ask the question - Why hasn’t the fig tree produced fruit yet? Again, Debie Thomas phrases this in a way that really hits home:

Um, here’s the manure, and here’s a spade — get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world? Um, go weep with someone who’s weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things. Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.

In short: imagine a deeper story. Ask a better question. Live a better answer. Do it now. Why? Because there is no “us” and “them.” Because there are no guarantees. Because all of us are beloved, all of us are perishing, and all of us need the care of a hopeful, patient gardener.²

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2130>

² Same as previous source