

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, 11.iii.2007, 10:00 a.m. EDT
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Holy Eucharist, WOV Setting 5
Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8, I Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

It is still Lent, so brace yourselves as we listen together to the triple refrain in today's Gospel:

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. . . .

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. . . .

If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.

--Luke 13:3,5,9

These three verses from today's Gospel resound in the ears of our soul like the crash of a pile-driver if we do what the Holy Spirit calls us to do on this Third

Sunday in Lent, that is, if we stop accusing God of wasting human life and its promise while we waste our own lives and forfeit our claim by grace to the promise that is ours in Jesus Christ. Why does God allow the godless to murder the innocent, godless men like Pontius Pilate and innocent men like those Hebrews preparing to offer sacrifice at the Temple whom Pilate had put to death, men like those Galileans mentioned at the beginning of the Gospel?

Was it God's fault or their own? Did they commit some secret sin? 'Neither!' says Jesus, but why do you and I content ourselves with just muddling through life and staying out of trouble when we could turn from our selfishness, no matter how harmless it may be, and still make a difference for having lived? There are

monuments, and not nearly enough of them, to the victims of mass murder, but where is there a monument to wasted lives, to intelligence and skills of every good sort that were not developed in this life or that, in your life or mine, in millions upon millions of men and women who simply exist? What is the difference between being put to death and living as though we already were . . . dead, dead before God and as good as dead for all the good we do our fellow man and woman. Talk about answering a question with a question! Jesus is deliberately bad about doing just that, and then, to drive home the obvious answer saying, 'Unless you repent,' literally, unless you *turn around*, 'you will be just as dead as those murdered millions to whom monuments are sometimes erected.'

'But, but *what about those who die an accidental death?! Isn't that a waste?,*' we ask, 'and doesn't God *care* about people, at least about *good* people enough to protect them from things like falling towers and scaffolding? Why does *that* happen? Why does God *let* that happen, the earthquakes and the plagues, the famines and the tornadoes and hurricanes?' 'Maybe those lives are wasted, and maybe they *aren't*, for all we know,' Jesus seems to snap back. Maybe those men on the tower scaffolding at Siloam were innocent, or maybe they were exceptionally righteous, or maybe they were just a normal bunch of carpenters and stone masons and bricklayers, and maybe God has gathered them to Himself all the same, but what about you and you and you,' Jesus turns the question on us

who also ask such questions with the news of each disaster that now reaches our ears and eyes with lightning speed, what about you and me? What are we doing just standing here like spectators instead of getting our heads and our hearts in the game? If we are making a habit of sin, then why do we not turn around, away from sin and towards God? If we don't, Jesus says, we will perish in our humanity, the image of God will die in us just as tragically, just as needlessly, just as catastrophically as anyone who was ever killed in a smash-up on the expressway, or in a hay-bailing accident, or in an earthquake, landslide or tidal wave.

God alone can answer those gigantic cosmic questions about why bad things and death

happen to good people, or to innocent children or even to ornery, sinful people but in pain and suffering out of all proportion to their orneryness and sin. One day in a theology class, one of Martin Luther's students thought he could stump the great Doctor with such a question, but this student asked, "What was God doing before He created the world," to which the professor replied, "Cutting switches to deal with the likes of you!" Putting God on trial or under the microscope of our speculation opens up questions that God alone can answer, while avoiding perhaps those questions which we know very well how to answer.

Those include questions like, 'Why am I so indifferent to God, instead of loving God above all things, as God deserves?' or 'Why do I talk to and

about others as though God's Name is a joke or curse word, or as though God cannot hear the lies I use to excuse myself or my destructive gossip about others. Why do I want what belongs to others, even to the point of destroying the living or the marriage of others, or my own household and marriage, why do I complain about never having enough while I care so little for the grace God offers me daily in His eternal Word and Sacraments through His Church?' There might be a thousand excuses for living like we are anything but a child of God, but making those excuses would make as much sense as a planter whose trees fail to produce fruit or nuts but who makes no change in his practice of cultivation. The bottom line, as Our Lord's parable of the fig tree drive's home, is that we

are created and redeemed—as individuals and as a congregation of the whole Church—to love one another and all as God loves us, just as the whole purpose of a fig tree is to produce figs.

The 'answer' to these questions, if we choose to pose them to ourselves as Our Lord does to us, is not to make excuses before God and the Church but rather to turn away from those things which hurt us and others and which waste our lives and to turn toward God's grace in Jesus Christ which can heal us, which can make us glad to be alive now and confident that we will live forever in His love as glory and praise before the Father's face. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

