

Year C Lent 3 If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall Luke 13 1-9

“So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” These words that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth are a wonderful way to sum up what Jesus is telling his followers. Jesus tears down popular thinking about God and about how God works in the world and directs his listeners to what really matters – repentance.

“So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” The eager crowd is gathered around Jesus, listening to all of his teachings. Right before today’s story, Jesus has been telling them parables that warn against loving material things, counting on stuff rather than on God. And he is telling them to be ready, be watchful – the Son of Man, he says, will come unexpectedly. This means, of course, that the time of judgement will come unexpectedly. The time is coming but, he says to the crowds, you don’t know how to recognize this.

He tells them they must be able to judge for themselves what is right rather than base their judgement on the world’s ways of thinking. If they choose to follow the world’s way of deciding what is right they could get tangled up in that choice. This warning is worth hearing: “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” Jesus asks them. “Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.” If you choose the world, it will be difficult to untangle yourself.

Right on the heels of this warning to not follow the world’s way of thinking about justice, the crowd demonstrates that they have, indeed, bought into the world’s way of thinking about justice – hook, line, and sinker. They remind Jesus of the Galileans whom Pilate had murdered when they came to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple. Jesus in turn reminds them of the eighteen people crushed to death when a brick tower fell on them. The implication is clear. The people believe this is God’s justice in action. Those people who died must have been horrible sinners. The people who survived, on the other hand, are enjoying God’s favour. Jesus tells them – and us – in no uncertain terms...That is not the way God

operates. God did not kill the Galileans. Pilate did. God did not crush the eighteen residents of Jerusalem. The tower did. God did not create COVID-19, an evolving virus did. We must be wary, too, of the opposite thinking – if we survive a close brush with death, if we do not get COVID as others do, if we have a cushy life and so on, we must not presume that God is blessing us. To be blessed by God is to be called to be partakers in the fulfillment of God's purpose as Mary was...Mary who was shunned as an adulteress...Mary who watched her son brutally murdered... "all generations will call me blessed," she sings in joy because she knew she had a part in bringing all things closer to the intended perfection.

An interesting – perhaps frustrating and disturbing – fact of Scripture is that we are provided, quite often, with opposing viewpoints. We read stories in which the narrator tells us the sequence of events in the story but does not tell us how we are supposed to feel about them. When the Hebrew people were getting to know their God, they did believe that God struck people down when they didn't get things exactly right in their worship or when they got God angry. They placed their human way of thinking – a way of thinking they had placed on all of their multiple false gods they previously worshipped – onto this God. Isaiah tells us to be careful about doing this... "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is.55:8-9). Reading Scripture can be tricky business. We often place our ways and our thoughts over top of what we are reading. Does Paul today sound to you like he is agreeing with Jesus' listeners who believe God constantly punishes people for not doing what he's asking them to do? Does it sound like Paul writes that God killed a hefty pile of Israelites in the desert? Does it sound like he is saying God tests us? Paul – a highly skilled orator – actually very carefully avoids saying these things without contradicting the stories he grew up with. The stories sometimes did attribute these behaviours to God but Jesus corrected that thinking and Paul aligns with Jesus. When Paul tells us who killed the Israelites he names serpents, and the destroyer – the devil, the evil in the world. It is the Israelites' *choice* to turn away from God that does them in...not God. One of my favourite quotations about Scripture comes from, probably, the very first Anglican theologian, Richard

Hooker. He writes, “It is no more disgrace for scripture to have left a number of things free to be ordered at the discretion of the Church, than for nature to have left it unto the wit of man to devise his own attire” (*Anglicanism*, p.11). We do not check our brains in the cloakroom before we head out onto the dance floor with Scripture. Hooker argued that we should not unthinkingly take Scripture as an unambiguous, across all time, source for solutions to all problems in our lives (*Anglicanism*, p.115).

This is Jesus’ message to his listeners today when he most definitely contradicts the prevailing thinking that when bad things happen, it’s God at work and, when good things happen, it’s God at work.

We do not worship a God who punishes sinners. We’d all be long dead. What God did was walk among us so that we would better understand him and his purpose for the world. What God did was open the door for us to be in relationship with him while we are yet still sinners. But Jesus does warn of a coming judgement quite often throughout the gospels. And notice that the concept used throughout is judgment – not punishment. We sinners will be judged. This is why, instead of getting into a lengthy discussion about God’s justice, Jesus brings his listeners back, time and again, to what they must *do*. Repent or you will perish like the ones Pilate murdered. Repent or you will perish like the ones crushed by the tower. This is not Jesus saying God had a hand in those deaths. Jesus is simply pointing out that not choosing God’s ways leads to death. Our consequence for choosing the world over God is not having eternal life with God...a life of perfect love, perfect joy in God’s perfect kingdom.

Thankfully, Jesus’ message about God does not end here – we would likely all be left quite concerned about whether or not we will have eternal life with God. But Jesus goes on to tell us the story of the unproductive fruit tree.

Trees that do not produce fruit comes up repeatedly. John the Baptist first introduced us to this idea when he was calling on Israel to repent by the Jordan River. He told us that the axe was at the root of the tree, waiting to chop. That’s certainly applying a bit of pressure on us, isn’t it? The first half of today’s Gospel is a caution that we must not reassure ourselves too quickly. Just because we

have not been chopped down, does not mean that we *are* producing fruit. “If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

But Jesus’ story of the fig tree lets us know that God is patient. We, just like those hearing the words straight from the mouth of the Messiah, are in that time of waiting – waiting for us to produce good fruits, the fruits of repentance.

Repentance is a continuous practice for us because living into our baptisms is a continuous practice for us – one that is not finished until, like Jesus, we fully enter into God’s perfect kingdom. What happens in baptism embraces a lot of aspects of our faith but one important thing we do in baptism is to promise to God to follow only his ways. We pledge our allegiance and our love and are given God’s allegiance and love. We promise that we will “persevere in resisting evil and, whenever [we] fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord” (BAS, p.159). Not *if* we fall into sin...*when* we fall into sin. Repentance is a daily thing and Lent is the time in which we are pointedly reminded of this. Repentance, as you’ve heard before, is not only being sorry for wrongs we have done. It is a turning of our lives to God and to God’s ways as we promised to do in our baptisms. To get a better understanding of what it truly means to repent, there is a confusing bit of Scripture that will help us.

The prophet Joel writes of the coming day of judgment and says that, even then, we have the opportunity to return to the Lord “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of sin” (Joel 2:13). God repents of sin. How is that even possible? God does not sin and God cannot turn to God’s ways, he is God. Most translations get around this troublesome wording by saying, “God relents of punishment” which is what it means yet it does not tell us the whole story. Here, the word repent carries the meaning of being compassionate, of having pity. God is a God of compassion, giving chance after chance during this time of waiting, waiting to see if we are a waste of good soil or if we will bear fruit. Bearing the fruits of repentance therefore means a turning to God and to God’s ways and, the crucial bit, always having compassion.

We are told by Jesus repeatedly that we are to be as God is...gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, withholding judgement, and

compassionate. Paul writes that, through baptism, this is made possible – we can transform into Christ’s likeness. We, the fig trees are being given that opportunity even now. We must heed the warning that standing doesn’t automatically mean producing. Those are the trees who call themselves Christians but do not act like Christians, the ones, as we heard last week, that Mahatma Gandhi called out when he said, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.”

Lent is our time to reflect and make certain we are not one of those fig trees and to hear how God is calling us to produce fruit. “If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”