

LENT III

Luke 13: 1-9 Journey Series for Lent 2013

I wasn't here last week as you know and I thank Vanessa for her leadership with you then. If you didn't know, I was at Presbytery in Fairview Alberta. To get there, Harris drove, and we were two days in the truck going, and two days coming back. In the grand scheme of things that's not a long time but I was sick, and it felt long. One thing about road trips is.....they give you time to think. You see things you wouldn't normally see...and you see your travelling companions in a different light than you would day to day. Journeys in many ways are gifts, they are lenses, they are portals if you will, opportunities for wonder....for what it is to be human and alive.

I don't know where you are in your own journey just now, but I invite you to stop and rest for a bit; put down your pack, take off your travelling shoes, breathe deeply and rest. I see a fig tree nearby....that must mean there's water, and it will give us some shade....let's sit by that tree, tell our travelling stories, share some refreshment....I pray for you that this place and what we do here will be for you an oasis of sorts- a place of blessing.

Because we need those places – we need them. The road is long – with many a winding turn.... and it's dangerous in spots. We'll run into some of those places as we move toward the cross. There are places along the way...you don't see them until you've come right upon them and it's too late then.... where people stumble and fall and really get hurt...and some never get over it. Jagged, rough places, where you can't see what's ahead, and you've hurt yourself and can't move.....ever been stuck like that in your life? Yea. Me too. Lots of places on this path where a person could get badly hurt.

For example: on our way home from Presbytery, we came through on the Alaska highway Monday night. Not very long after that, there was a horrible accident right there that killed a young girl. That's the very kind of thing I mean. Not only are there literally places on the road that are dangerous, but spiritually dangerous too.... because when things like that happen.....it takes you to a place in your heart and soul – where you might get stuck, hurt, unable to move. Saying WHY saying what's it all about anyway, what's the point.... Do you know what I mean? Those are the very places Lent takes us and we are led to one of those places in today's readings.

Hard questions. The WHY question. The “what kind of God would let that happen” question.

We're going to stop for a rest by a fig tree now....we're going to ask those questions, and see what that tree might have to offer travellers, bruised and limping from the things they've encountered on the road.

While we're sitting here by this tree, take a look back at the road we've travelled so far. The first Sunday of Lent we saw Jesus tormented in the desert by the tempter....saw in that a clue about what our own journey might entail. Noticed some sign posts there. Some choices: faithfulness over safety, integrity over dazzling the crowds, not counting on God to miraculously pull us out of things.....good sign posts. To choose to follow Jesus is to choose a road that is long and winding - truly. Temptation. We know something about that.

Last week you saw Jesus crying. Let me read that for you again.

Jesus, crying for the city, for the people, aching because of the things we do to one another, the ways we do not listen, longing to gather us as a hen gathers her chicks.

And now this week....they come to him, stunned by some really disturbing news: the news of what Pilate had done. Picture this – it's almost unbelievable. While some Galileans had been worshipping in the temple, Pilate sent troops in, and had them slaughtered. Mixed their blood with the blood of the sacrifices on the altar. Can you imagine? Probably as a warning to others who might be plotting against the empire...who knows. Deliberate, unspeakable cruelty. In the name of power and keeping an empire safe. National security, he'd probably have said. What does Jesus have to say to this, they ask?

What do YOU have to say to things like that? What happens in your heart, your soul, your body....when you encounter things like this, and what is it that helps you to keep on in the face of stuff like this? To put one foot in front of the other so that it doesn't stop you dead? Spiritually I mean? This is the very kind of jagged ugly place that wounds many people beyond continuing the journey in any meaningful way. Sometimes, people encounter meaningless, deliberate, ugliness and pain and throw up their hands and say

I quit.

You know what I mean.

The road can do that to you.

Here, they're coming to Jesus – asking. What do you say, teacher, about this?

You'll know that they are coming out of a faith tradition that taught, at least some of it taught, that when bad things happen, this is a sign of God's displeasure. God is angry, and this is punishment. That is a strong, strong part of the Hebrew scriptures. I think they were expecting Jesus to tell them who was to blame. At least, as horrible as that would be, there would be some way of understanding it then.

Jesus does something astounding.

He challenges both the theology that says God punishes and the desire to point the finger to ease our minds

he asks from us a more limber imagination

suppleness of thought

and a flexible, world view lubricated with grace and a healthy application of humility slathered on to ease joints grown stiff with blame and too little wonder

he says

do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No I tell you. No.

I wish he had left it there. But no....he goes on

But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Then he uses another example. Not one of deliberate cruelty but one of those chance happenings....people in the wrong place at the wrong time....

Or those 18 who were killed when the tower fell on them. Do you think they were worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem? No I tell you. No.

And then again

But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Did this horrible thing happen as punishment? NO he says. NO. Do we think that we will avoid the ambiguities of life by resorting to a cause and effect mentality? That diminishes us, underestimates God, and does not honour the complexity of a world where things just happen. Just happen.

Does God punish in this way? When something horrible happens is it God's wrath? No Jesus says NO! And I believe he's calling us to repent from that way of thinking....turn around to face the God of the covenant whose world is more layered, more lovely and more terrible than our little systems can fathom. Repent and turn to grace – turn around and face the God of the journey, he says.

Just as they're wondering, as we are wondering, what the heck he meant, he goes on:
let me tell you a story he says.

Read the parable.

What do you make of that?

There are 184 sermons in here – you're only getting one today. Ok maybe one and a half :0)

Who do you think is the God figure in this parable?

What would it say if God were the owner of the vineyard?

How would it be different if God were the gardener?

And could it be read differently ...with God as the tree?

And you...who are you in this? Are you the owner, impatient, demanding fruit right now? From whom?
Are you the gardener? Patient, willing to invest time and energy, trusting that....that what?
Are you the tree?

Jungian psychology would say that all of those are true and to really enter the parable we need to explore all of those possibilities. I invite you to do so sometime this week. Read it, think and feel your way into this story as though you are each of the characters and then as though God is each of them and see what insight there might be for you there.

What comes to me this time through
is God, the patient gardener....who wants us to live.

Life is hard the road is long and there are terrible things that happen. Why? We have no idea. What we do know is that pain is not God's will or God's way. The place to look for God in pain is as a patient gardener, still trusting still working and still wanting life and love for us.

As though God is saying

yes life is cruel. But you can be kind.

Yes life is unfair. But you can be fair.

Yes life makes you wonder

but if the wondering stops you from getting on with the work of trust and hope

While we are busy asking why
God is busy digging around a little fig tree, willing it to live and bear fruit.
While we are nursing our blisters from the road and trying to find a meaning in suffering
God is digging away, saying “maybe this will be the year for figs” and piling on more compost.

We have the gift of time. And a gardener who WANTS us to live
A gardener who wants us to live. And thrive
and who is hands on, willing to dig. I'm inviting you to dig too. Dig deep

and may God bless you as you do, because it's time to start the journey again. .
Bon voyage.