

Sermon for Lent 3C
Sunday, March 20, 2022
“God will get us through it”

Texts: Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Suffering and tragedy are two among several topics that could be taken from today's set of readings. Suffering and tragedy are part of earthly existence; suffering and tragedy are among the realities of life. Suffering and tragedy occur in numerous places in the Bible, are the subject of many psalms, and will be central to our journey through Holy Week in a few weeks, when the story of Jesus's passion, crucifixion, and death is retold in graphic detail. But, at the end of all those Bible stories, God's power to deliver is the message.

The first lesson from Exodus is the well-known story of Moses and the burning bush. The Israelites found themselves enslaved in Egypt; powerless against Pharaoh, they were forced into a life that they did not choose. By the time that Moses was born, the Israelites had endured suffering and slavery for four hundred years. But God spoke to Moses and told him that he is faithful to the descendants of Abraham. Last week we heard the story of the covenant that God made with Abram (later Abraham) to be faithful to him and his seed forever; this week, God told Moses that he was about to make good on his promise, deliver his people, and lead them to a promised land and a better life.

In today's short Gospel lesson, Jesus begins by making a reference to a tragic event involving some Galileans who were killed under Pontius Pilate and the death of eighteen Jews by the collapse of the tower of Siloam. History has not been restrained in remembering Pilate as a ruthless ruler. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, in his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, described Pilate as a ruthless prefect or governor of the Roman province of Judea and Samaria whose tenure was characterized by brutality and injustice and the slaughter of many Jews. Not much is known about the slaughter of those pilgrims of whom Jesus spoke at the beginning of today's Gospel. In fact, this account in the Gospel of Luke is the only account of that event in scripture. We can presume that those Galileans were devout Jews who went to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, which could be done only at the Temple. What they did to result in Pilate's having them killed is unknown, but perhaps something led Pilate to suspect that they were plotting some sort of rebellious activity. The collapse of the tower is also not mentioned anywhere else in scripture, but it is known that the wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem at that time took a turn at the Pool of Siloam and is likely to have had a tower placed at a strategic point. The Pool of Siloam was the site where Jesus healed a blind man by telling him to wash in it, and his sight was restored. At the end of the Gospel lesson, Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that bore no fruit even after three years of anticipated fruitfulness; Jesus ends that parable by saying, “Give it one more chance.” God always gives us the option and opportunity to do better.

All of these stories involve tragedy, suffering, and dashed expectations in some way. We can certainly empathize with those who felt sorrow around the Galileans who were the victims of Pilate's regime or those killed by a falling tower. And, I think we can imagine the farmer's disappointment at the fruitless fig tree. It was commonplace for the people in Jesus's day, particularly the Jews, to associate tragedy and suffering with sin, and, indeed, Jesus cautions his audience against being the bearers of tragedy without having repented and reconciled their relationship with God. But, he also wanted to steer people away from the assumption that tragedy and suffering were the direct result of having sinned.

We have experienced suffering and tragedy in our own time and in our own lives. In the last few weeks, we have watched tragedy unfold as Russia has launched an attack on Ukraine, a sovereign republic. We have heard and seen the horrific bombings of innocent people in civilian buildings, the demolition of cities, the loss of life, and the sudden complete disruption of life for millions of people. We know about falling towers too; those of us over twenty-one years old, especially if we live in New York City, remember the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11/2001, where over three thousand people died. When tragedies of this scope occur, we are inclined to wonder, "How could God let this happen? How could a God who is so good and so powerful allow such tragedies to happen to innocent people?" But, there isn't one person alive who hasn't faced some kind of tragedy or loss. We have all endured hardship of one kind or another in the course of our lives, and rest assured that there are more to come in our futures. That's the way life is. We face crises to our health, financial hardships, broken relationships, natural disasters, and many other circumstances beyond our control. Some may be struggling with an addiction, whether they're aware of it or not, whether they're dealing with it or not. Life is not always easy. Life is not always beautiful or rosy or fun. Suffering and tragedy are painful realities of living in this world, often events that we don't even understand how or why. Life throws us curve balls that we do not expect. Many times our hopes are dashed.

But Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians centuries ago is good news for us today as well: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." What a powerful message! What hope for us when life takes us to unhappy places and brings us to unfortunate circumstances. The worst thing we can do is to give up and let tragedy and suffering defeat us. We can overcome tragedy and suffering with God's help. That is why it is so important that we always stay in relationship with God. There is a popular inspirational saying these days: "If God brought you to it, he'll bring you through it." Only God can help us through the rough times and give us the strength to carry on.

Sometimes things in our lives don't go the way we planned, often situations don't meet our expectations, many times we get disappointed by events, people, loved ones, even our own selves, but God expects more from us than to lay down in defeat. God

expects his creation to bear fruit; he expects each and every one of us to bear fruit; our testimony of God's power in action in our lives is one type of fruit that we can bear. There is no greater testimony to God's awesome power than to say, "God brought me through it."

We need to trust God. We need to confide in his faithfulness and never give up. We can find comfort in the ways God delivered his people throughout the Bible, we can find comfort in knowing that God doesn't give us more than he knows we can bear, and we can find comfort in the profound words of the Collect for today:

"Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Lent 3 (Year C, Volume 2).

"Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVIII," <http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/ant-18.htm>

"The Working Preacher," http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2789

"In the meantime," <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-3-c-suffering-the-cross-and-the-promise-of-love/>