

Lectionary C February 28, 2016 Lent 3
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN
Pastor Roberta Meyer

Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-8 (1)
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Fear, Being Thirsty, and Manure

Maybe I have told you this story before, I don't remember, but I can't help it because every time I read this Gospel lesson, I think of it. It is engraved in my mind. I'm talking about in **1978**, my mother was in the hospital dying of cancer. That particular day, I was sitting by her bedside reading her mail to her. I came across a card from someone neither Mom nor I knew. I started reading it out loud, then came to a halt. "Dear Emily, you are in my prayers..." I had to think fast and make something up because she was listening, I faked not being able to read the writing... "God's Love be with you." or something like that. What the writer really said was something to the effect that if Mom would confess her sins and turn her life over to God she would be healed. That is the last thing she needed to hear from anyone, let alone a "do-gooder" stranger.

We all ask "**why**" when bad things happen. That is our human nature. But when we start answering the why like we have an inside to God's mind, that is when we get into trouble. That is what is happening at the beginning of our story in Luke today. A couple tragedies had taken place around the area where Jesus was. People were gathered at the town square, per say, trying to make sense of it...questions like, "Why were those people killed and here they were standing there, still alive? Why? Was it because they didn't sin as much as the people who died? Or maybe their sins weren't as bad. Well, that's when **Jesus** came into the conversation. *"He asked them, "Do you think that because those[people] suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all [of you]?"* Did you hear that, "worse sinners?" That must have made Jesus laugh. How can you rank sin? Any sin blocks God's Love. But we do that all the time. Rank sins, measure ourselves against someone we see as worse than ourselves. Why?

Fear. You see if those catastrophes happen randomly, if walls crash on just anyone, if just anyone's mother can die of cancer, then none of us is safe. But if we come up with a reason, like, oh, they must not be right with God—their sin is worse than ours... then we feel safe. We think we are safe in the good guy's court. Well, Jesus didn't let that kind of thinking go on. Life is fragile. Bad things happen. That is a fact. And try as we may, we can't make sense of it. There is no rational reason, at least in our realm of understanding. Stuff just happens. And like Paul **warns** in our 1 Corinthians text, *"Don't be so naive and self-confident. You're not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it's useless. Cultivate God-confidence.."*

That is what is important. Trusting God because we can't get inside God's head. We read in **Isaiah**, *"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.”

So what then? What does God expect from us in times when things are happening around us and we can't make sense of them?

I hear the answer in all the scripture readings for today. Be **thirsty**. Isaiah 55 begins with this plead, “*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;*” and Psalm 63 says, “*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water*”

When we are thirsty for something, there is a desperate need to drink. During this third week in Lent, Jesus is inviting us to thirst for God. Only Jesus said it in another way. He told the crowd that gathered that day, ... *I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did*”

“Repent.” “Turn Around. Most of the time, when I hear the word repent, I think of confessing stuff I did wrong and promising not to do that stuff again. We use the word “repent” to mean turning away from our sins. But, you see, as hard as we try, that is nigh on to impossible for us to do. But that isn't exactly what Jesus meant when he called for us to repent.

The New Testament word that Jesus used for repentance is “metanoia” which is the root of our word **metamorphosis** which means something like transformation. It is what happens to a caterpillar when it becomes a butterfly, and just like a butterfly, the emphasis is on what it turns into, not what it turned from. So when Jesus says “Repent,” he is not so much saying, “Turn from sin,” he's saying, “Turn to God, **Thirst for God**, crave God's Love.”

Today we are all here to witness little Amia's baptism. This gift of **baptism** is God's promise to always be that fountain of life that quenches our thirst in this desert world. As the waters of life are splashing up here for our new sister, we are all invited to dip our hands into this water when we come up to share in the **Lord's Supper**, where our thirst is quenched with the Body and Blood of our Savior.

And this brings us to the **manure**. Remember, in the parable Jesus told, the owner of the orchard told the gardener to cut down the fig tree that wasn't bearing any fruit, the gardener *replied*, “*Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it*”

But, wait a minute, manure stinks. And to those who don't understand its benefit to the soil and the plants, it is unbearable. However, when you trust the gardener, or farmer, you can handle it being spread on the land around your home. I had a neighbor once who had a standard reply every time someone complain about the “fresh Country air” around her farm. She'd say, “Mmmm, I smell money!”.

The point is sometimes we don't understand, or even like what happens at our feet. This world is compromised by sin. But when we turn to God, thirsting for God's Love, we don't have to be afraid. **Paul** reminds us, and I am reading it from the Message Bible. “*No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.*”

God is not a punisher.

God neither causes nor delights in suffering and calamity. Jesus, our Gardener is telling us, that even when we don't understand we can trust that the ultimate answer to sin isn't punishment – not even in the name of justice – but rather mercy, reconciliation, and new life.

And since Jesus is telling this parable on his way to Jerusalem, and his crucifixion, is he telling us that **the cross** is not about punishment for sin either. Not for Jesus' sin, certainly, but also not for ours.

What if instead we recognize that God's answer to sin isn't punishment but instead is **love**. That is, in Jesus God loves us enough to identifying with us completely. In the cross, then, we see just how far God is willing to go to be with us and for us, even to the point of suffering unjustly and dying the death of a criminal. And in the resurrection, we see that God's solidarity and love for us is stronger than anything, even death.

So what can we say in the face of suffering and pain that makes no sense? That God is with us. That God understands what our suffering is like. That suffering and injustice do not have the last word in our lives and world. And that God will keep waiting for us and keep urging us to turn to God, **thirsting** for God's fountain of Love. Amen