

Lent III
March 7, 2010

One of the most ancient and most powerful human religious impulses is the desire to connect, in one way or another, the notions of sin and tragedy. It's to say, or to think, or to feel, that special moral cause and effect which insists *this* happened because of *that*.

When there is tragedy, we really want to think that, somewhere, there must be a moral reason for it. If something terrible happens to me, shouldn't that be because I am being punished for something, even if I have no idea what that could be? That at least makes some sense of my suffering. If something terrible happened to him, or to her, or to them, shouldn't that be because, in some way, morally, they have it coming. After all, God is just; and the universe must have some balance in it. This is at least part of what's behind some of those recent, incredibly stupid comments by Pat Robertson about the earthquake in Haiti.

What's more, Robertson has a point. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, has some very real support for this view. There are whole books, several whole books, that give exact lists of the bad stuff that will happen to folks who do bad things, and of the good stuff that will happen to folks who do good things. This business of God enforcing a moral connection between tragedy and doing wrong on the one hand, and prosperity and righteousness on the other hand; this is a very real tradition in parts (but not all) of the Old Testament.

In spite of this, in the Gospel we just heard, Jesus takes on that whole tradition. He looks at this belief in the necessary connection between tragedy and moral evil, a belief that was well over 3,000 years old in Jesus' day. And Jesus says, "No". He says, "that's not the way it works." This was important, this was unexpected.

The questions Jesus asks are universal: “What about those Galileans who Pilate murdered?” and what about those people who were under the tower when it fell? “Were they the worse sinners?” Now, let’s think for a minute about those ancient questions. Somebody else died, rather horribly, you didn’t.

Imagine that you’re listening as Jesus deals with these questions. What about the Galileans, what about the others? Were they worse sinners? As you listen, what do you *want* the answer to be? As we sit here, alive and healthy, what do we want to hear Jesus say about the others, about the ones who got the disease, the ones who did not walk away from the crash, the ones who fell?

After all, if they *were* worse sinners, what does that say about us? And if they were *not* the worse sinners, what does *that* say about us? And in either case, what does it say about God?

If we listen carefully, what Jesus says is shocking. “No”, he says first, *they* were no worse sinners than you are. And, second, “unless you repent”, (he says this twice), “it will go at least as badly for you”. Jesus says this to the winners—to the safe ones, to the ones who got away with it, to the ones who hope that if the others are worse, then *we* are all right, if only just barely. It’s to the winners that Jesus says, “it will go the worse for you if you do not repent”. There we are. We are all equally deserving in the eyes of God.

The presence of sickness, of heartbreak, of tragedy, this is not a sign that the victim is a worse sinner, or a worse person, than the ones who escapes totally. Jesus insists that there’s no necessary moral connection. We are each on equal ground. That’s what he says, twice and very clearly, and we have to deal with that.

We have to deal with the other side of that, too; with the side that says that the absence of tragedy—good fortune—doesn't mean that the folks with good fortune, whether it is we or someone else, are any better. || So where does that leave us?

Where do we find comfort and hope? It's a dangerous and a scary world out there; it can be a truly horrible world out there. And it would be nice to have some guarantees, or at least some sort of an edge.

Today we hear Jesus say this one thing particularly clearly: We cannot find our comfort and our hope in our own goodness, no matter how much of it, or how little of it, we claim. In the same way, we cannot find our comfort or our hope in anyone else's sin—no matter how bad that is. In part, Jesus is taking careful aim at that lowest common denominator that says, "Well, maybe I'm not perfect, but at least I don't...(fill in the blank), or "at least I haven't...(fill in the blank), or "at least I'm not as bad as...(fill in the blank)"; so maybe I'll be alright. Jesus says there is absolutely no hope in that, there is absolutely no comfort in that, there is absolutely no future in that. Whatever or whoever we use to fill in the blanks, they are no greater sinners than the rest—and unless **w**e repent....

In saying this, Jesus is not only challenging an important part of his own tradition; he is also striking at that basic human religious impulse to connect sin and tragedy. Jesus says "no" to all of that.

And what does he offer instead? What does Jesus present as an alternative to the questions about who is the worse sinner? Strangely, Jesus offers a story about a farmer and his tree.

It normally took fig trees no more than three years to mature and bear fruit. Centuries, no millennia, of experience had established that if there were no fruit after three years, the chances were virtually certain that the tree was a loss. Barren three-year-old fig trees were parasites. They took up valuable space and used good earth that could be put to better use by something productive, something valuable. Any gardener with half a grain of sense knew that; and any gardener with half a grain of sense also knew what to do. After all, the tree had been given a fair chance. So, the gardener in the parable makes a stupid request. He asks to waste precious space, and precious soil, and precious fertilizer, on something that has already demonstrated its uselessness.

The point here is not horticultural. The point here is not that the gardener is wise or that the gardener is just. The point here is that the gardener loves the tree. And in spite of the way the parable ends, you can be absolutely sure that, a year from now, that gardener will be right back, saying the same thing, asking again for one more year, and trying the same or a different cure all over again. That's because the gardener loves the tree. You see, the only hope that tree has is that the gardener will keep at it, and that the boss will keep listening, even if the request makes no sense, even if keeping that tree is a stupid thing to do. This story is what Jesus offers as an alternative. The gardener isn't just.

Regardless of who we are, regardless of what we have done or of what we have not done, regardless of what has happened to us, or what has not happened to us, or what might very well happen to us; there is only one source of hope, only one possibility of comfort. The only hope we have is the father's love, the father's presence and care for us, and the father's mercy. That's what we have; that's all we have; and that's enough.