

We are into the journey of Lent...and the comings and goings of Jesus up and down Palestine. He knew the journey to the Holy City, the very center of Israel's religious and political life, would be dangerous—but he could not stay away. He had to preach his message!

This is the key to keep in mind as we try to unlock this sort of bewildering passage from Luke today, which contains no less than 3 distinct stories, one of them another of Jesus' parables. What is the passage about??

The writer of Luke gives us some clues. Not only is Jesus on his way to a final confrontation with his opponents, the previous chapter in Luke includes a whole section on the need for vigilance, that sort of “watch out” on the part of his followers and to being alert in recognizing the signs of the times. Right before this week's passage is a saying on the necessity of reconciliation—of making it right—with an opponent. So, themes of impending crisis, preparedness, and setting things right while you have the time lead us right into today's Gospel read.

“Are you ready?”, Luke might be saying to us. “Are you prepared for what I am about to say next?”

And then, suddenly there is striking news about a construction accident and a massacre of political rebels. They *“told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”*

Now, the slaughter of the Galileans is not mentioned in any source outside the Gospel of Luke. Though the victims were Galileans, we assume the deaths occurred in Jerusalem, since they were killed as they were offering sacrifice and the

only legitimate place for sacrificial worship was the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus too would suffer a similar fate at the end of his pilgrimage to the Holy City. Jesus too would come to his fate because of a decision made by Pilate.

Jesus himself recalls *“those 18 who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them.”* Again, this collapse is not mentioned elsewhere in scripture.

These are the kind of stories—the kind of tragedies that make us all think about the injustice of things—about why bad things happen to good people. Justo González provides us with a more modern version: it would be like Jesus asking us, “Do you really think that the people who lost their lives when the Twin Towers fell were more sinful than anyone else in New York?” Of course not. In trying to understand the “why” question, Jesus has told them they are looking for the wrong answer.

Why God? Why? We cry out in lament when tragedy happens. We struggle and wrestle with trying to make sense of something senseless. Even in our own personal struggles, that pale in comparison to that tragic event, age-old logic wants to sneak back into our consciousness.

Somebody...or some group...becomes the scapegoat for the disasters that unfold. Somebody ain't living right—and that's the root of it all. Common sense suggests that if there is a demonstrable effect, there should also be an explainable cause. It's like we sometimes have this desire to comfort by explanation. It seems like it is part of who we are as human

beings—it just comes with the territory. But, in trying to offer explanations, we sometimes demonize others.

But, the writer of Luke, will NOT let Jesus go there. He simply avoids any discussion about that major human concern of whether there is some connection between suffering and sin. Maybe yes. Maybe no, the Bible seems to say. (It seems to depend on what particular piece of scripture you land on..and then on how we or the biblical experts choose to interpret those scriptures). But, in this particular scripture, Jesus does NOT give an answer as to why folks suffer. He does clearly dissociate untimely death from both sin and guilt—that the tragedy that befell the workers was in no way related to their moral state.

He says, *do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you....*

Really, if God has in the business of figuring out judgement in relation to our sins, who would be left on this planet? Jesus says no to simplistic answers concerning deep and complex questions; says NO to attempts to solve deep troubles with quick fixes. Jesus is responding in a pastoral way to a major human ache.

So, maybe this is really NOT a passage about the so-called moral dilemma of tragic events. Maybe—instead—it is a passage about seizing life’s opportunities. Jesus says *“but unless you repent, you will perish as they did.”*

Just for the heck of it, I googled the phrase “seizing the opportunity”. And it came up with all these other phrases—

bite the bullet; go for it; grasp the nettle; take the bull by the horns; cross the Rubicon; leap into the breach; just do it; take the plunge; jump in with both feet; choose one's fate. Thing is, it seems like the time we have for seizing those opportunities is shorter than you might expect!

Jesus was on a mission. We are on a mission to follow in his way in the power of the Spirit. In these times, much is unknown. Many questions will remain unanswered. In the end, the future is God's, but we share in the mission of unfolding the future. That is where our responsibility lies.

And it all pivots back to loving our neighbors.

Do we really know the people we say we love? (or ought to love?). Do we take the time to know them? (cuz we always think we don't have the time to do that!). And do we allow our authentic selves to shine through? To allow ourselves to be known for who we really are. And to do this all—before times runs out on our particular mission?

Some years back, I attended a gathering of a variety of religious faiths, standing in solidarity with the Muslim community after a tragedy. And though it was crucial to be together—to mourn and lament—the true challenge lies in the ongoing task of building relationships based on love and respect—across those lines of color or clan.

After that gathering, folks lingered and chatted. Two Muslim women approached the group I was standing with and thanked us for being there—and we all started a conversation together. One of the women was a former cardiologist at Blank Children's Hospital. She spoke about how long she had been in the U.S., and the dreams and aspirations she had for her children and grandchildren to have a good life—to

make a difference in the world—to live without fear. All truly universal values. It was then that I realized that it was the first time I'd had a real conversation with someone of the Muslim faith. That took some 60 plus years for me to accomplish—must be that the manure sometimes take a long time to have an effect!

Michael Curry puts it this way: “The results of our witness are not ours to know. The working out of God’s kingdom is not ours to figure out. Our task is to labor, without having all the answers, and to acknowledge the deep mystery of it all. To witness, and then wait, to take our best step and leave the rest to God. We labor now for a future we are not meant to control.

Keep in mind that we CAN NOT do everything—and maybe there’s a sense of relief in that, a sense of liberation in realizing that. Being free from managing the results of our actions is what provides the space and frees us to do SOMETHING, and do it well. We may never see the end results, but that should not stop us from seizing the opportunity. To enjoy one another, to love one another, to do that something that might accomplish a little less suffering in the world by the way we live our lives—while we have the time! Living our lives more kindly, more humbly, more justly today. We are the prophets of a future not our own.

Thanks be to God!