

Lent 2 NL March 12, 2017
Psalm 27 Luke 13:1-9, 31-35 Of Foxes and Hens

In this morning's gospel reading, we hear Jesus confronting those reacting to a report that the blood of some of their countrymen has been mingled with the blood of their sacrifices in the temple. It seems some form of one of those eternal questions has been raised, "What did they do to deserve this?" "Why them?" Jesus responds, "Don't think that they were worse than any of you! This did not happen to them because they deserved it." "Oh, and by the way, unless you repent, you too will perish!"

The truth is, we don't always get what we deserve, and we don't always deserve what we get. Although it seems to be human nature to try to understand why bad things happen to us, or others; most often there are no clear answers, or reasonable explanations. There are simply no guarantees for any of us against hardship, difficulty, pain, loss, or even death. Life, as we all know, can turn on a dime.

Jesus answers his questioners, "Unless you repent, unless you turn around and head in another direction, you too will perish." What are they to repent of? I'm not absolutely sure, but I get a sense that it is that very human tendency of seeking to blame the victims, of assuming, or believing, despite all evidence to the contrary, that bad things happen only to bad people. That those who have been killed were somehow deserving of such a fate. Blaming the victim, says Jesus, is no way to respond to tragedy! Then he tells them a parable about a fig tree that fails to bear fruit. An owner of a vineyard comes by and sees a fig tree, in the ground now for three years, and still bearing no fruit. He orders it destroyed. The tree, however, has an advocate. Someone who knows about fig trees, someone ready to invest time and energy into helping it bear fruit. The gardener begs the owner. Leave the tree with me for one more year. I will dig around its' roots, and fertilize it. Next year, we will see if it bears fruit.

Maybe I'm reading into this story, but I think Jesus is saying, Repent! Turn around! Head in another direction! Like the gardener in the parable, move towards compassion! Move towards advocacy. Move towards positive action on behalf of the weak, the wounded, the broken. There is a harvest of lost potential just awaiting our next move.

Yesterday's 40 Acts meditation tells a story of a couple who moved into a vibrant, multicultural area of their city. The author, Kailean writes that it was an area that was, in many ways and places terribly neglected, damaged, and run down. As they settled into their new community, instead of disparaging the people who lived there, or blaming them for the state things were in, they began to dream a new future for the whole community. They began by creating a community garden. They were delighted and surprised at people's willingness to join in cultivating the small plots of fresh vegetables. Their hearts delighted as they witnessed relationships blossom and grow. One thing led to another, and before long they began a second reclamation effort. They found a derelict plot of land, littered with beer cans, old mattresses, syringes, and rubbish, and they dreamed a different future for that little plot of land as well. They imagined a green space for the community—a place to socialize, sit and enjoy food, to plant fruit trees, keep beehives, and enjoy nature. Today, the site is being transformed with an organic food growing plot, sensory garden, beehives and a story telling area for children. The local community now comes to help maintain the site, have fun and enjoy nature! Kailean and her partner are over the moon. (Kailean Khongsai)

Franklyn Ayensu, of Washington D.C.'s Church of our Saviour, writes, "It struck me the other day, and with the force of a fact ... that compassion just may be the solution to perhaps 80% of all of the world's problems. If we overflowed with compassion, we would also be filled with the capacity - the willingness - to ask questions and listen, to reach out, to be with, to bear, to bend down lower to help. We would want to share out of our resources... in order to ease mental and physical anguish. We would flow. We would find it natural to do what it takes - whatever it takes - to help other persons out of the hole they're in; and to go wherever we need to go to find the answers we don't have in order to help the person we don't know how to help. A heart that's been softened, worked over, and enlarged by compassion, writes Ayensu, becomes the Ever-Ready Energizer Bunny battery that keeps going even when reason balks, even when defenses prickle, pride stiffens, and common sense

fails. It ... endures every ambiguity, tolerates every rebuff, and rises from every setback to attain the purpose that God sent it out unto: to bind the broken-hearted, the heavy-laden, the crushed of spirit.*

In the middle of this morning's Gospel, reading there are two bits we did not read. The first is the story of Jesus healing the bent over woman. The second is the parable of the mustard seed—the first models healing compassion. The second argues that even small things, planted in love, can make a great difference for others.

But this is the 2nd Sunday of Lent, so where we pick up again with our reading, Jesus is being warned by some Pharisees to, “repent” of his plans—to “turn around” and walk away from Jerusalem. “Herod will kill you!” they warn. But Jesus is defiant-- resolute. He will follow through on the work he has come to do. “You tell that fox, I will not turn back, I will not repent! I will heal, I will deliver, I will finish the work I have come to do!”

Mere moments later... we overhear the lament of his heart, and we recognize the true vulnerability of his person. He spreads his wings wide and broods over the beloved city, “O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” You will not see me again until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Six chapters later in Luke's gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem as a grieving mother hen knowingly making her way into the fox's den--knowingly entering into his death. Those who greet Jesus on his way into the city on that day spread their coats on the road and cry out, “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.” Indeed those Pharisees see him again as he approaches Jerusalem and once again looks out over his beloved Jerusalem, and he weeps. “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace.”

He will perish there, with those once gathered under the shelter of his wings now scattered.

What a strange moment this is on our Lenten Journey. Here, on this day, we are called to witness Jesus' deep heartbreak, at our betrayals, acknowledge their terrible cost, and yes, to turn ourselves around and still follow him... even to those places of deep sorrow. We find ourselves challenged to embrace a life marked by compassion, kindness, and generosity of spirit—to open wide the doors of our hearts.