

**Jeff's reflection:**

Today's scripture reading is not easy. Jesus responds to a question that no one asks, and then tells a story.

It begins with the sharing of news. Even though at that time there were no social media, no hourly news reports, no media organizations, people still heard of events. News still carried.

In this story people gathered round Jesus tell him about something that has happened. Then, like now, the news is about tragedy. They tell him that Pilate, governor of Judea, had committed an act of murder and terrorism. We aren't given details and we don't have any other historical source for this story, but they say that while some Galileans were offering sacrifices to God, Pilate "had their blood mingles with their sacrifice" – which sounds like Pilate had the Galileans attacked and killed while they were worshipping God.

We are not told that anyone comments on this horrific event. They just tell Jesus. Perhaps they know that Jesus himself is a Galilean, and they expect this will be especially disturbing news to him.

We aren't told what emotions show on Jesus' face. We aren't told whether his body language reveals anger or grief or sadness.

From what Jesus says, I suspect that the news connects with something already occupying Jesus' mind, perhaps thoughts about the fate that might await him in Jerusalem.

Jesus says, "Do you think because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

Jesus appears to respond to a question that no one has asked: "Is a violent, unexpected and seemingly undeserved death, actually a judgment from God?" Why didn't God save these people who worshipped God? How does this make sense if we trust in a just and loving God?

People have been killed. Jesus seems to go from that news to the question, "Where is God in this? Where is God in our lives, our world?"

Jesus then adds to the discussion another story that would have been in the news and on social media today.

Jesus refers to a tragedy that occurred at Siloam, a suburb of Jerusalem. He refers to a tower collapsing and killing 18 people. Again, we are not given any details. It sounds like a tragic accident, perhaps during construction of an aqueduct.

Jesus again says, "Those who were killed when the tower fell – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

Jesus quickly discounts any suggestion that these deaths are punishments, are deserved, are because the deceased were somehow worse people than anyone else.

No one had said it, but then and now, there were people who thought it – people who denounce God's love by saying that AIDS is God's curse on homosexual persons, who say that a flood or tornado is God's punishment for people who haven't accepted Christianity, who say that God will rid the world of COVID if everyone lives a moral life.

Jesus rejects any theory of God punishing people for anything they have done, rejects any suggestion that God operates a moral hit squad killing people who don't meet God's standards.

But...but...then Jesus says something else. Both after referring to the murdered Galileans and to the people killed by the collapsing tower, Jesus says, "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

That's one of those sentences in scripture that preachers tend to ignore when they are preaching. The rest of the passage allows us to speak about God's love, but then we have this comment that seems to say that one must repent to be saved, to not perish.

I'd like to avoid these words by saying that Jesus never said them, and the writer of Luke's Gospel just put those words in there...but we don't know, and even if Jesus didn't say it, we still have the gospel writer putting these words into this passage, implying that Jesus might have said this.

I'm not sure what we are intended to take from these words, but as I read this passage several times this week, the way I ended up dealing with these words is to put them in the context of Jesus contemplating going to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, perhaps already planning to enter the city on a donkey, mocking images of kings and their power; perhaps already considering a prophetic overturning of tables in the temple; perhaps suspecting that this journey to Jerusalem will cost him his life.

He is thinking all this after travelling from village to village, seeing people begging, seeing people lame, seeing broken bodies in need of healing, seeing people in need of hope, seeing the signs of a people traumatized by living in a land occupied by a foreign military force.

Perhaps Jesus is thinking that this is God's world, but the world is filled with so much pain, so much despair, so much violence.

His thoughts go to the word of John the Baptizer, who called people to 'repent', to change their attitudes, their perspectives and their actions; to repent, to reimagine how the world could be if human beings began to live as God's children, God's people, as expressions of God's life.

I don't know if that is what is intended by these words of Jesus in this passage, but it makes sense to me in our context today. Repent or all perish! We increasingly receive reports and warnings from scientific and ecological bodies about climate change, telling

us that time is running out for this world to heal, for humans to change our reliance on fossil fuels and plastics, to change lifestyles and practices. Humans need to remember that we are just part of this creation and we must live in harmony with the rest of creation.

Repent or everyone will perish. When a nuclear warhead was dropped on Hiroshima it started a nuclear arms race that produced enough nuclear weapons to kill everyone on earth several times over.

Repenting looks like caring for creation. Repenting looks like disarming the world.

Repent – we know that we must repent, or this world may perish. Whatever the intent of Jesus or the Gospel writer, these words are relevant today.

Jesus responded to the news he was told by speaking of repentance, and then, being Jesus, he told a story, he told a parable.

He said that the owner of a vineyard planted a fig tree. Periodically the owner inspected the tree, wanting to collect some figs; but never found any fruit on the tree. Finally, frustrated, the owner told the gardener to cut the tree down. “Why should it be wasting the soil?” said the owner.

The gardener defended the tree saying, “Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, then you benefit. If it doesn’t bear fruit next year, you can always cut it down then.”

It’s a parable. It’s a story told by Jesus, so we can expect that the story holds layers of insights, interpretations and possibilities. Jesus told stories to begin a conversation, not to end one.

Our tendency, when we hear a parable, is to assign identities and roles to the characters. Does the vineyard owner represent God? If so, does that mean God runs out of patience with us if we don’t bear fruit and so discards us? If so, are we to be gardeners, trying to convince God to be merciful?

Is God the gardener, the one who always opts for more time, for another chance, for continued possibility and future?

Does the fig tree represent human beings, or Israel at the time of Jesus, or nations or...?

The story invites conversation, discussion; invites us to open our imaginations to the imaginative dance of the parable. The story invites us to ask questions and entertain possibilities.

For the parable does seem to lead us away from the judgment that we will perish to the possibility of new growth. We don’t know what the next year holds for the fig tree, we don’t know what will happen the next year in that vineyard, but we know that the

future remains open in this story, the tree will receive the gift of manure, and we will wait...

For Jesus, preparing to go to Jerusalem, considering what the future might hold for him, the parable engages him and us in the mystery of God's mercy, God's love and God's ongoing creation.

For me this parable, at this time in our history, reminds us that the future is still open, that God does not have a cut-off date, or a best before date. God does not reject and punish. God invites us into a story of God's ongoing creation. God doesn't give up on God's creation, including humanity.

The word 'repent' appears in this week's reading, but the theme word we have attached to this Sunday is the word 'REvive.'

This Lent we are shaping our worship around the general theme of 'Are you Ready?' We have given each Sunday a specific sub-theme, choosing for each week a word beginning with the letters 'RE'. The first two weeks of Lent we had weekly themes of 'REsist' and REconcile'.

This week's theme word is 'REvive'.

In the history of Christianity, the word 'REvive' is probably most associated with revival meetings- gatherings or services aimed at inspiring church members and at converting non-church members to the Christian faith. The gatherings may be held in a church or in an auditorium or a tent.

The word 'REvive' has roots in the French word 'vivre' meaning 'to live'. 'Vive la France' is a patriotic call proclaiming 'long live France'.

So REvive carries the implication of living, of living again, of regaining life, strength, consciousness (we REvived you after you fainted), or of giving someone strength or energy or hope – we might REvive a person's faith in humanity.

In today's parable, the gardener asks for time to REvive the fig tree, to bring forth life, to feed and nurture and make fruitful- and, in doing so, to revive the owner's faith in the tree's purpose and value.

Jesus call to repent is an invitation to come to life again, to REvive. Perhaps another way of thinking about resurrection is to call it the Great REvival!

Maybe what we need, at this time in history, is a worldwide REvival!

A REvival of wisdom to live as part of creation, to respect God's creation, to live as a healthy organ of this living creation.

A REvival of a spirit of global community, so that we reject war and build communities of peace and support.

Coming out of two years of pandemic, faith communities can embrace this as a time of REvival – not a return to how things used to be, but an awakening to God's Spirit shaping us, creating us, loving and healing through us.

Faith communities can recommit to the way of Christ, to caring for God's world and for all God' people.

Christians can recommit to nurturing their faith through prayer, meditation, acts of forgiveness, of justice and of compassion.

We can REvive the sense of the sacred permeating everything, REvive awareness of a reality not contained by studies, statistics, measurements or research data; REvive awe and wonder, REvive awareness that we are a blessed union of spirit and flesh; REvive trust that we are created in God's image and are children of God, partakers in and bearers of God's love.

REvive our trust in God's love. REvive this world to sharing God's love.

Jesus heard the tragic news of his day and called for repentance and told a story of revival.

Today, we are invited to join in God's worldwide revival.

For we are not alone. We live in God's world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.