

The Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019
Year C: Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9
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“Take off your shoes, Moses. You are on holy ground.”

Years ago I made a weeklong retreat in Alta, Wyoming in the middle of January. Let me tell you that Alta, Wyoming in the middle of January is a mighty chilly place. Each night the front doors of the retreat center would become banked with snowdrifts, and in the morning we'd find a thin sheet of ice adhered to the glass on the inside, where condensation had collected and frozen. Even inside the retreat center, we stayed pretty well bundled up most of the time.

On Sunday morning at the end of the week, we prepared to celebrate the eucharist. After the readings and the sermon, our celebrant removed his shoes before setting the altar and offering the eucharistic prayer. I remember his socks were decorated with colorful rainbow stripes, vivid and bright against the wooden floor of the chapel, in contrast to the drab warm clothing we were all wearing that day.

Afterward I asked about why he had done this, as cold as the day and the floor were. “It's holy ground” he said. “I always celebrate the eucharist as close to barefooted as I can manage.”

Holy ground, Moses. Holy ground. A place where God appears, and asks that nothing should come between God-self and ourselves.

I've been thinking about holy ground this week. The places where God appears, speaks, makes Godself known. The “thin places” as they are called in Celtic Christianity, where the veil between what is seen and touched, and what is unseen and beyond touch, becomes thin and permeable.

Some of them are famous. Chimayo. Iona. Jerusalem.

Some are obscure, known only to the people who have prayed there.
St. Michael's little chapel, or our outdoor labyrinth.

Some are beautiful and peaceful.
St. Crispin's, looking over the lake.
Little Niagara Falls, at the Chickasaw National Recreation Area near Sulphur.

Some are thin places, holy ground, because of something, even something bad, that happened there.
200 NW 5th Street, Oklahoma City.

St. Paul's Chapel, New York City.
Mother Emmanuel AME Church, Charleston, South Carolina.

I've been thinking of these sorts of "thin places" in particular, reflecting on the Gospel this morning. A group of people have gathered to pray and worship in their particular place of worship, holy ground for themselves and their parents and grandparents before them, and suddenly something so awful happens that there are no words to describe, let alone make sense of it.

A temple in Jerusalem.
A church in Charleston.
A synagogue in Pittsburgh.
A mosque—two mosques—in New Zealand.

We recoil in shock. We weep with those who weep. We ask, and cry out, demanding to know WHY? God, are you listening?

We don't know what prompted Pontius Pilate to order the slaughter of the Galileans that we hear about this morning in the Gospel. We do know from other contemporary sources that Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor over Jerusalem and Judea, and a nasty piece of work. He would not have hesitated to order the death of any number of people, by whatever means and under any circumstances, if he believed they were a threat to his authority and power.

We don't know what cause the tower of Siloam to fall and kill eighteen people. (Gravity was certainly involved, but other than that...)
Towers fall because of weak foundations, or faulty construction, or when airplanes crash into them on a bright blue Tuesday morning in September.

And we cry out, and weep, and wonder. God, are you listening?

Jesus doesn't try to explain these events, or to make sense of them.

He tells his hearers: "It's not what you think. God is not punishing these people for anything they did, or did not do. They were no worse, nor were they any better, than anyone else."

"Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

"Repent"—the common English translation for "the M word."

Say it with me, y'all: Metanoia.

Metanoia. Change your mind, change the way you look at the world, and the way you live in it. Enter into the mind of Christ; discover and live in the Kingdom of God even now.

Jesus' hearers in the gospel are looking for a math equation. They want him to justify the magic formula: (1) These people must have sinned, therefore (2) they perished in a terrible way (3) because God was angry with them, right? That's how it works, isn't it?

No, it isn't. Not for Jesus; not for the God he calls "Abba", Daddy. Not in the dominion of God that he proclaims, in word and deed, in his own life and death and resurrection.

Unless you commit metanoia—change your way of thinking, change the way you understand who God is and how the dominion of God is at work, Jesus says, "you will all perish just as they did."

We're in the season of Lent as we hear these words from the Gospel. At the beginning of the season, we received the smudge of ashes on our foreheads and heard another set of words: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

My friend Diana used to say "We came from dust, and we will return to dust. That's why I don't dust my house...it might be someone I know."

You are dust, and to dust you shall return. And so shall I. And so shall we all. The birth-to-death ratio of the human race is still 1:1, exactly as it has always been. Jesus is not promising his hearers that they will somehow escape dealing with death. Jesus himself is not spared that experience.

And yet...

Even in that experience of death, to which we all will come, soon or late, there is a difference.

Jesus tells his hearers (indirectly): "Look, all those people you've mentioned were unaware of what was happening. Offering sacrifices to keep God happy, or building a fortress for protection—all those things people do to try to control their lives and satisfy the demands of the system—when that system is worthless anyway!"

He tells them a parable, of a fig tree planted in a vineyard. Behind this particular fig tree and vineyard stand all the vineyards and fig trees of the scriptures—symbols of the promise of the Dominion of God, enough and abundantly enough of food and wine, of peace and safety for all people. But there's a problem, you see—this particular fig tree is not doing what it's supposed to do. Where are the figs?

The landowner, whose tree it is, is ticked off. "Why isn't this tree producing figs? Cut it down, it's a waste of space!" It's his tree, of course. He can do with it whatever he likes. Why should he have to wait around for it to produce figs after all this time? (The landowner kind of reminds me of the bratty Veruca Salt in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*: "I want it NOW!")

The gardener, who knows about trees, speaks up. “Sir, (Gk. *kyrios*, also translatable as “Lord”) let it alone for another year. Let me work with it some more. If then it bears fruit, well and good. If not, YOU can cut it down.”

YOU can cut it down. I will not cut it down, fruit or no fruit.

The gardener knows trees. He can see what this tree can be, even though it is not yet.

The gardener is patient—

unlike the owner of the tree, who wants the fruit immediately.

The gardener knows what the tree needs, in order to flourish—

and is willing to do whatever is necessary for that flourishing.

The gardener understands, in spite of appearances,

that this tree has life in it, yet to be realized.

The gardener looks at this barren tree, and sees a living, growing, nourishing, holy tree.

A tree of life.

In the Gospel of John, at sunrise on the morning of the Third Day, Mary Magdalene stands at the empty tomb. The body of Jesus is not where it ought to be, the stone has been rolled away, and she is confused and weeping. Suddenly she realizes that someone is standing with her. She thinks it is the gardener. Only when he speaks her name, does she recognize Jesus beside her.

A patch of dirt in a graveyard, rutted and marked by a heavy stone’s track,
becomes holy ground.

The dead and barren tree of Good Friday, the instrument of crucifixion and death,
becomes the Tree of Life.

The gardener at the empty tomb becomes the Risen Christ.

From old dusty death, God’s garden brings forth new and abundant life.

I wonder...

what is your fig tree,

that the Holy Gardener wants to help grow and flourish?

What digging,

what fertilizing,

is needed for it become an abundant, life-giving tree?