

March 3, 2013

The Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-9

All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

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God the Gardener

Everything that goes on here at All Saints' is about nothing less than salvation. If we are not about proclaiming, responding, receiving and growing in God's saving grace, then we might as well not bother. Community is available in lots of places. Great music can be found all over town. There are plenty of avenues for service and childcare and supporting worthy causes outside of God's church. We can take classes of a seemingly infinite variety everywhere from our universities to our gyms. If what we do here, and I mean anything and everything we do here, is not about salvation then we are but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

So what exactly *is* salvation? It is one of those words, like 'grace', that point toward everything that we seek and hope for and taste and know as we move and are moved towards right relationship with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. Our Prayer Book, like the Bible tends to prefer a variety of images to help us imagine our way into grasping the magnitude of this reality that God desires nothing but the very best for us our whole lives long. At once salvation is the healing of a sick person and redemption of something tarnished or left to languish at a pawnbroker. Salvation is finding ourselves in a prison with the echo of the door clanging shut behind us and nothing but misery ahead, only to discover another door opening before us and knowing freedom as we walk though it to the unknown. Sometimes salvation seems like being in a small boat on a stormy sea, spotting land through the spray and finding ourselves thrown onto the beach as our boat is shattered. And at other times salvation is something we know as like the turning of an aircraft carrier in heavy seas, something that takes a good while and requires all systems working together to find the right heading. Salvation is as small but as essential as not taking that next drink or succumbing to your particular compulsion; and as large as knowing yourself forgiven and loved and with a measure of freedom you previously thought impossible. The fullness of salvation, like love itself can seem different in your sixties than it did in your twenties,--different, yes, but no less urgent. The lens and story that shapes our understanding of salvation is Jesus, with the story of Jesus being remembered and told in the community of Jesus.

So why is it that when our eyes begin to open and our hearts are warmed and the possibility that we really don't have to be stuck in our current circumstance and love begins to shine through our carefully constructed defenses against trusting anyone really, but especially God, --why is it that we keep falling back into a world of blame and scarcity and fear and violence and death? Why? The church has asked this question from the beginning and defined it as the problem of post-baptismal sin. Why is it that

after renouncing the Devil and all evil, accepting Jesus as the way of life and moving from death to life,--why do we then continue to fall into sin?

Every one of us can see how we stay stuck in a world of death which is the reality of sin in our own lives if we consider what Jesus has to say to us in our story from Luke today. He takes on those who would seek some kind of salvific meaning in violent disasters. Was it God's will that so many should die in the fight against Germany or Japan? Or was it only God's will that the aggressors should suffer? Then what of the allies? *"Do you think that because some Galileans suffered when their blood was mingled with sacrifices they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"* Whose fault was Katrina or a tsunami or a plague or a famine? Was it corrupt governments, greed, the stupidity of people who live in vulnerable places, all those of us who drive cars, climate change, bad engineering of buildings, levees, bridges, nuclear power plants or anything else in all creation? *"Do you think that the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"*

Can you hear your own questions here? At some point we all consider the possibility that violence can be redemptive or good. We are like Job's friends, trying to find some purpose or order in dreadful events which perhaps help us be less anxious and more secure. This terror of all the bad things that can happen are the root of self-righteousness, --that habit of trying to make sure that we are doing everything we can to assure that we will not be victimized. We are not only like Job's friends, but also like the rich young man who asked Jesus "What must I do to be saved?"

So let's not look for violence to be meaningful or redemptive. We are just as much in the thrall of death if we go the alternative route. The alternative is to say that all such attempts to allay our fears and create meaning through connecting disaster with morality is wrong and stupid. When we excoriate those who claim that AIDS is God's punishment for sin or those who say that Katrina was bound to happen in a notoriously dissolute and wanton city, we are close to saying that the only conclusion we can draw is that there is no God, or that God has nothing to do with disaster, or that disaster is just the price of freedom. We are close to a complete denial of meaning or purpose to be wrested from such events and so saying that death is the last word in life which is, after all, nasty, brutish and short. If you have ever wondered if your atheist friends might not be right, then you are not alone *and* you are in the thrall of death.

It seems that if we seek meaning or if we deny meaning, either way, death holds sway. Who among us has not seen ourselves in either or both of these tendencies in the face of disaster? These are our responses in the thrall of death and none of us is immune.

Jesus will not bless such deathliness in any way. He says that rather than looking to find meaning in these events, we will find salvation in looking at ourselves in response to these disasters and root out or challenge our tendencies to accept violence as a way of life. All he says to us is that we too will perish unless we repent. He says we should turn toward life, re-orient ourselves and allow our imaginative worlds to be shaped by new and life giving possibilities.

And so he tells this strange story of the fig tree (and here I am indebted to theologian and our friend, James Alison¹.) Jesus insists that we re-orient ourselves from the world of death and imagine ourselves anew in a world of life. When we first hear this strange parable, we start by imagining that God is the Master who plants the tree, do we not? But then the man does something shocking, greedy, against the law and wrong. In Leviticus 25² no harvest of fruit may be taken in the first three seasons and even in the fourth year only the first fruits may be taken and no profits. The man who planted the tree in Jesus' story is all about scarcity, punishment, utilitarianism. 'Why should this tree be wasting the soil?' he asks. Surely this master is a God of our own creation, a God not worthy of worship, the kind of God who would demand bloodshed and recompense for sin and who would bless our efforts to wrest meaning from violent disasters: Katrina, Columbine, Newtown. (The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.) This cannot be right. This master cannot be God. Life is not to be found in this deadly imaginative construct. No, Jesus is pushing us to find God elsewhere. Could it be that God is the gardener in this story? Could God be the one who begs the powerful one not to foreclose, but to allow the possibility of righteousness or right relationship reflected in the law? Could God be the one who is not afraid of sinking his hands in the dirt? Not ashamed to work with the dung and perhaps nudge the tree into producing fruit in the fourth year? Is Jesus not saying that the way of blame and foreclosure and violence and greed leads to death, but that we can know a reasonable and holy hope of another way if we will but allow our imaginations to conceive a way of abundance? His listeners would have probably known something that is not so accessible to us. They would have known this image of the barren fig tree from the prophet Joel, and the prophet's attendant demand for repentance from the people³. *And* they would have known that a little later the tree produced its full yield of fruit⁴.

The story of the fig tree offers us the way of salvation in which we are like the fruitless tree being worked, year after year, by God, until we are rooted in nourishing soil and so bear fruit. My brothers and sisters, everything that we do here at All Saints' that is worth doing is for the purpose of opening ourselves to God's saving grace through spiritual practice. Our capital campaign is but one example of our choosing to practice generosity, encouraging the practice of attending to our place in the community of Jesus, --a place which every one of us has. This campaign 'For All The Saints' draws our attention to those who are not yet with us and to the practice of proclaiming the Good News that we have received and inviting others to share in it. You get the idea. When we allow God to shape our imaginations toward all that is good and true and holy, we begin to taste the first fruits of salvation and to see those fruits in us and in each other. Praise be to God. Let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer.

¹ James Alison, "Reflections on the Lectionary" in *The Christian Century*, February 20, 2013, p.21

² James Alison may mean Leviticus 19 in which we find the law of Orlah

³ Joel 1:12

⁴ Joel 2:22