

Sunday March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Lent III

**PRAYER:** As in a dry and weary land where no water is, our souls have thirsted for you, O Lord. Now we have come into your sanctuary; the shadow of your power and glory envelops us.

If you are near, Lord, do not remain silent; do not hide from us. Incline your ear, and come to us; hear, that our souls may live. Make with us an everlasting covenant, and we shall dwell in the shadow of your wings and sing your praise today, tomorrow and forever. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** All who seek forgiveness; trust that the Lord hears your cries. When we cry to the Lord in our trouble, God delivers us from our distress, stills the storm and brings us to the haven of divine mercy. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O Holy One, who is Love Divine and all Loves Excelling, source of all that is good, grace filled and precious, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and God of all the people gathered in this place; we offer our selves to you. It is an offer that comes after much consideration and a measuring of all the other claims on our lives. Work, family, friends, recreational pursuits and so much more: all asking for our attention and our commitment. We are fully aware Gracious Father and you have warned us so often that the call of lesser things than yourself can leave us: cold, empty and certainly unsatisfied. But still we persist. We persist in trying to find the easier path. We persist in following the crowd. We persist in comparing our lives not to your loving Son Jesus but to our neighbours. Why can we not anchor our lives, as we should, to your presence? Why are we so willing to cast ourselves into the whims of culture and social convention? Perhaps we know why but we would rather not confront our own short sightedness.

We are, O God, short sighted, because we fail to embrace the whole picture of Christ. How frustrated you must be and how saddened you must be that we so easily accept and celebrate the triumphant Jesus, while we ignore the broken and bruised Saviour you offered us. How quickly we want to jump right over this season of Lent and Good Friday and splash down into the joy of Easter. How quickly we pay attention to religious figures who promise victory, financial rewards and perfect lives and who ignore the cross and the true cost of discipleship. No wonder we are confused and hurt, O Father. No wonder we question your goodness when we see not the full picture of Christ. Yes, the resurrection speaks to us, but so does the crucifixion. Yes, despite what we may think or hear from others, Christ has something to say when we feel: lonely, unappreciated, physically sick, misunderstood and even hungry. Yes, Christ has something to say to us when our friends abandon us, when authorities (even religious authorities) misuse their power and authority, and most certainly when our good intentions are criticized. Yes, Christ has something to say when we have a bad day, when perfection eludes us, when our children misbehave, our spouses hurt us and debts seek to overwhelm us. We know Jesus has something to say in our darkness, but even more significant we know he enters our darkness and shines his light. As the hymn says, "Jesus knows our every weakness", and "grief and sorrows he has borne". O God, as much as we love the victorious Jesus, we know that the very human part of Jesus is what we really need today. So, come O Holy Spirit, let the empathy of Christ speak to our broken hearts today. Let his strength in the face of pain, struggle and even death, grant us courage. Let his loving presence come to us even now to comfort us, ease our loneliness and prepare us to bring Christ to others who are facing overwhelmingly dark days. Let the victory that we so long to experience come from a real sense that all things are well with our souls even in the midst of the rough seas of life.

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With our needs so open and naked before you we place before you the concerns of our hearts today.

Truly we seek the blessing of our burdens being made light, and the grace to face our challenges with dignity and faith. Come now, O Holy God, and enter every trembling heart. Restore our hope, renew our faith and let us all know the depth of love such as we have never experienced before. This we ask in the name of our victorious risen Lord and our loving crucified Saviour, Jesus, who taught us to pray together...

**BENEDICTION:** O God, in Christ you remind us that every place is your sanctuary, every moment your holy moment, every person your beloved. Let us, by our care for the earth, our respect for each moment, and our concern for your people, bear witness to the presence of your love and to the sanctity of our life. Amen.

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Isaiah 55:1-9 and Luke 13:1-9

“Sharpening the Axe”

My own experience tells me the truth of the saying, “You learn something every day.” This week, one of the many things I learned about has to do with a career I never knew existed, but which can be quite lucrative in financial terms. How many of you have heard about people who call themselves “Domain Hoarders”? I’ll give you a hint; it has to do with the internet. Anybody figure it out yet?

Well, “Domain Hoarders” are men and women who register website addresses in the hopes of someday cashing in. Like when some new company, or new product, wants to use that domain name in their internet service. I learned of this pursuit when I came across an article about Roger Cadenhead who has made a lot of money hoarding domains. He has registered several that he has sold for tens of thousands of dollars on eBay.

Cadenhead was looking ahead when Pope John Paul II died, because he immediately registered the domain name [www.BenedictXVI.com](http://www.BenedictXVI.com) before the new Pope’s name was even announced. Cadenhead registered it before the Vatican knew they even needed it. Another domain name [www.PopeBenedictXVI.com](http://www.PopeBenedictXVI.com) surpassed \$16,000 in bidding on eBay, money which the Vatican didn’t want to spend, so they went back to Cadenhead.

Cadenhead however doesn’t want money for his domain. A Catholic himself, he was happy to turn the domain over to the Vatican. In his own words, “I’m going to try and avoid angering 1.1 billion Catholics and my grandmother”. He did however; want something in return. In exchange for the domain name, Cadenhead wanted: 1. One of those Pope hats; 2. A free stay at the Vatican hotel; 3. Complete absolution, no questions asked, for the third week of March 1987. (Max Lucado, Facing Your Giants, Pg. 131)

Makes you wonder what happened that week in 1987, doesn’t it? Maybe it reminds you of a week in your own life you would rather forget. Why, do you wonder, did Cadenhead feel the need to get absolution for anything? What was he afraid would happen without the absolution? What do you think might happen to you, if you were to go for any length of time without repentance and absolution? Keeping your absolutions up to date, some people believe, is akin to having clean underwear on lest you get in an accident. You never know.

Do you think then, that unresolved sin leads to: illness, unemployment, car accidents or as some preachers were trying to say in recent months, hurricanes, or tsunamis? Is a massive hurricane, tornados, or tidal wave: God’s judgment on wayward people; something like what God did during Noah’s time? I mention this because it seems to be the theological argument of one of the most prominent TV evangelists in the United States.

Pat Robertson of the *700 Club*, has in the past, linked disaster to what he believes is the moral failures of other people. In the week after 911 Robertson blamed the attack on the World Trade Center on the ACLU, abortionists, gays, and feminists. Two weeks after hurricane Katrina, that devastated Louisiana, Robertson said New Orleans was under God’s judgment for America’s abortion policy. Why New Orleans specifically, he didn’t say.

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And more recently, Robertson went on television to say that the earthquake in Haiti was judgment for a pact Haitian's made with the devil, 200 years ago. Is Pat Robertson right in his assessment; after all, he has claimed on many occasions to have had direct communication with God, and God has told him specific things; albeit, his predictions about the end of the world have never come true. Again, I ask, is Robertson correct?

Does God do terrible things to punish people, or allow them to happen as punishment? I am sure that many, if not all of us, have considered that possibility. Or at the very least sat with a disheartened individual who thinks that way. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus had just been talking about trying to work for reconciliation with our accusers. A very pertinent lesson considering our litigious society.

Right on the heels of this teaching on reconciliation, comes a shocking, and yet fresh news story to Jesus. Some one is saying to Jesus, "Did you hear?" The story being that while some people from Galilee were making sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem, Governor Pilate's troops burst in and murdered them, mingling their blood with the blood of the sacrifices. It is a horrific story. Quite in keeping with Pilate's penchant for violence. A story that can make your skin crawl just thinking about it. It was outrageous.

The initial motivation for sharing this story has to do with forgiveness and reconciliation, which Jesus was just talking about. Should someone be reconciled to someone else, who has done such a horrific thing to, and I quote, "innocent people". And thus, the issue is raised. Why were these people, specifically harmed? After all, they were going about a religious service; that is, making sacrifices to God. These were decent law-abiding people, in a place that was supposed to be a sanctuary. I am mindful of the resemblance to what happened recently in Christchurch New Zealand. Did they deserve such a death?

Now, one of the things I find most interesting in this story, is that no one asked Jesus if they deserved this fate. All we are told is that someone came, and reported to Jesus what happened; meaning it was a very recent incident. Maybe those following Jesus were just keeping him apprised about what was going on. Perhaps they expressed this story out of a feeling of hopelessness or powerlessness or as a possible exemption to reconciliation. If you are not safe at the temple, where are you safe from violence, and the whim of the Roman governor?

Actually, I might know why they really told him this story. As we know many people were beginning to see Jesus as the Messiah, but what they wanted, and what Jesus represented, were two different things. The Romans were occupiers, and oppressors, and the popular opinion was that the Messiah would rid the land of Romans. Maybe if Jesus heard about this atrocity, he would use his "messianic" powers to start a revolt. Maybe if Jesus hears about this outrage, we can force his hand.

Instead of telling the people to take up arms however, Jesus takes this horrific story, and turns it into a teaching moment. Even if the crowd didn't say it out loud, common thinking would hold that these poor souls must have really angered God to be butchered right there in the temple; even if the Romans were bad people. Many people would have believed they got what was coming to them. In eastern mysticism we might call this Karma.

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Obviously from Jesus' response to the news, some of the crowd must have believed they were better people than those poor souls because they were still alive. It seemed like a logical step to believe that if I avoid tragedy, God must like me, and I am living an okay life. Maybe some of those listening to Jesus had been to the temple just the day before this tragedy, and believed they were somehow shielded from danger. Even if this sentiment was not openly stated, we know it was present in many hearts; because Jesus addresses it directly.

“Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than others from Galilee? Is that why they suffered?” How many of us have asked similar questions? “Is my friend suffering from cancer any worse a sinner than I am? Is my brother or sister who died in a car crash farther away from God than I am, because I drove that same stretch of highway and lived to talk about it? Are the Haitian or Venezuelan people any worse than say Canadians?”

What, we may wonder, as the crowd did that followed Jesus, is the correlation between sin and suffering? Must I mind my steps, lest God let the next bus slam into me? Is this how the sovereignty of God works? Like Job of the Old Testament, we can really beat ourselves up wondering why, if I am a good person, do all these terrible things happen to me. Why is life so tough on me?

Why are things not going well in my family, in my job, in our church, or in my neighbourhood? Why do I struggle when my fellow believer flourishes? And just like ancient Job, we are trapped between this idea of fairness, and God's larger plan for our lives. The bible states that Job got so depressed; he actually took to sitting in sack cloth and ashes to show his miserable state.

My version would be to sit in a bathrobe, eating chocolate chunk ice cream. Why God, is this happening to me? Why God is this happening to: my neighbour, my cousin, my co-worker? The human mind, when faced with tragedy, always seeks justification for the horror and the pain. There must be a reason for this darkness, and we twist ourselves into awful knots of confusion and self-recrimination trying to sort out what may not be possible to understand.

One of the interesting elements of the grief process is when the survivors start justifying the death of their loved one. “Well, they never looked after themselves. She was, after all, quite elderly. It was his/her turn.” And the most distressing one I have ever heard. “God needed them, so he called them home, or God needed a new angel.” The problem with that last statement is that God doesn't need anything, including you and me.

Again, the crowd wonders, “Is that why they suffered?” Now, please pay attention to what Jesus says. Let his words sink in, and hopefully we will remember them when faced with a crisis. “Is that why they suffered?” Jesus asked. “Not at all?” Did you hear that? “Not at all!” Maybe we should get tee-shirts made up with “Not at all!” The answer from our Lord Jesus, God incarnate, is that the Galileans suffered not because they were the worst of sinners.

Their lives were no worse than anyone else. The same could be said for those eighteen workmen who died when a tower in Siloam fell on them. God did not push the tower over on them, nor did he order the Roman soldiers to kill those Galileans, because they were the very worst sinners.

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However, there is a lesson to be learned from this tragedy, and every other tragedy we experience or hear about.

Jesus says, “And you will also perish unless you turn from your evil ways and turn to God.” In other words, this tragedy in the temple, and this tower falling on eighteen men, are a wakeup call. Things happen; bad things happen without warning. Towers collapse, hurricanes destroy cities, tsunamis wipe out miles of beach, doctors give life threatening diagnosis, and cars crash in winter storms. Bad things do happen to all of us.

Tragedies have been a part of the human condition, since humans were first created. We just do not know what tomorrow brings, so every time we hear of an awful event, Jesus says we should reflect on our own spiritual status. Am I ready to meet my maker? If I was one of those eighteen men killed at Siloam, would I be prepared to meet God? Tragedy, it seems, is actually a sign post to repentance; at least that seems to be what Jesus is saying.

We live in a delusion, if we think we are a better person simply because we’ve avoided some of the awful stuff we read about. The Apostle Paul in Romans tells us that “All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” And he adds later, “The wages of sin is death.” It seems then that only by the grace of God do we soldier on; whether we be good or bad people. It is just as Jesus said, “the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.”

Good people and bad people get cancer, die in auto accidents, and have their cities crumble in earthquakes. Good and bad people have: a rough time at work, fail examinations, have relationships fail, become unemployed, lose money on investments, get cheated, are humiliated, loose sporting events, have children that disappoint them, spouses that misunderstand them and generally have very bad days.

What then do we make of the struggles of life? It seems to me then that the first healthy response we can make is that if sin is involved and sometimes it is, we are all in need of repentance. Lloyd H. Steffen wrote in *The Christian Century* how when King Frederick II was King of Prussia, he went to visit a prison in Berlin.

While he was there, all the prisoners tried to prove to the king that they had been unjustly imprisoned; a common enough occurrence even in prisons today. All the men in the prison, shouted out to the king about the miscarriage of justice perpetrated on them. It was a deafening chorus of voices and clamoring hands through prison bars. All the men were at the bars, shouting to the king; all except one.

That one man sat quietly in a corner, while all the rest protested their innocence. Seeing him sitting there oblivious to the commotion, the king asked him what he was in for. “Armed robbery, your Honour.” The king asked, “We’re you guilty?” “Yes, Sir, I entirely deserve my punishment.” Then the king gave an order to the guard: “Release this guilty man. I don’t want him corrupting all these innocent people.”  
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Now I know what you might be thinking. If we all deserve punishment for our lack of repentance and turning to God, why do some obviously evil people seem to prosper. Why doesn't God make towers fall on bad people, or have cancer strike career criminals; for example? Jesus answered that question with a parable about a fig tree planted in a garden; that season after season never seemed to produce any fruit.

The owner of the garden tells his gardener to cut down the tree, but the gardener pleads for more time to nurse the tree along and to see if it will bear fruit. The parable has a couple of meanings that are helpful.

The fig tree can represent both us as individuals, but it is also used in the bible to represent Israel as a whole. The fruit is of course repentance, both in the people of Israel and by extension all people who were created by God. The owner of the garden is of course God, who wants to get rid of the unproductive tree, and that of course means judgment. The gardener, who represents Jesus, pleads with the owner for more time.

Perhaps if Jesus works a little harder at nurturing the fruitless tree, like putting some manure around it, we shall see a change; but this patience has limits, because if the tree remains unfruitful it will be cut down. The lack of judgment then isn't a reflection of God's indifference to the evil we see around us and maybe within us, but rather it is a reflection of God's mercy and grace. Every day that the axe of judgment doesn't fall on us, is another day for us, by grace, to get our house in order. So, we are to be ready.

This theme of being ready is a recurrent one in scripture, especially from Jesus. In Matthew chapters 21-25 there are parables and dialogue that stress that we must be ready. We are not to take for granted that just because something bad hasn't happened to us that our lives are completely right with God. Even if the sun is shining on us, we need to turn from our sin and turn to God, because we don't know what tomorrow will bring.

Are we bearing any fruit; the fruit of repentance or are we just making our lives into firewood? Are we turning away from our evil ways and turning to God? These are questions each seemingly meaningless tragedy, should place in our hearts and minds. Not because God is punishing us, but because God is showing incredible patience. God is waiting; will he see any figs this year? If not; well you know what will happen.