

LENT 3C 2025
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
March 23, 2025

Life is in turmoil. The economy is falling apart. Religious life and practice are under stress. Leadership is driven by fear, whether it be of opposition or of being oppressed by those with more authority.

This is the reality faced by Luke's hearers when he writes his Gospel. It's probably sometime near the end of the first century, some twenty years after the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and dispersed Jewish residents across the known world.

Those who began to follow Jesus of Nazareth aren't in any better position. In fact, they face increased opposition and oppression as they refuse to acknowledge the emperor of Rome as their god. Most of those who walked alongside Jesus before his crucifixion are gone, many martyred for their faith. Only a few who heard his voice remain, and they are approaching the end of their own lives.

The two events mentioned in today's Gospel lesson are only recorded by Luke. There is no other record of Pilate ordering worshippers killed as they made sacrifices. There is no other record of a tower falling in Siloam, killing eighteen people under its weight. But then, history is not the point. Suffering is.

Not suffering as in trying to place blame, find causes, or any other reason trying to answer "why." Suffering is part of life, and it is that part of life that Jesus joins in his incarnation.

It has been said that all of scripture comes from times of conflict and suffering. Each of these times exists for one reason—evil exists in the world, this creation that God pronounced as "good" when it came into existence. In those times of suffering, scripture tells us of one other event that occurs in response to suffering. God shows up, and God speaks.

It happened when Abraham wondered if he had left his homeland on a wild goose chase. God showed up, made a promise, and sealed it with a covenant. It wasn't the first covenant, mind you. There was that rainbow placed after the earth began to dry out in Noah's time.

Today we hear of another one. Moses, who is eighty years old, sees a strangely burning, but not consumed, bush as he tends his father-in-law's flock. God shows up and speaks. And God's speech is greater than Moses' own speech impediment. God has a way of overcoming our own shortcomings. Later on, another covenant, another sign of God's presence is established in the Passover and passing through the waters of the Sea of Reeds.

We keep reading, and we find times when God kept showing up, often in ways that defy human tradition. Deborah, Elijah, other prophets tell the story. The covenant becomes intensely personal. "I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, they shall be my people."

And yet, the Greeks came, then the Romans. Later on, it's the Ottoman Empire, then World War I and imposition of boundaries by another outsider—Britain. There's disagreement about just who are "God's people." And with that, confusion about who God is even as there's plenty of evidence as to who God is not.

So did those Galileans deserve what Pilate did to them? And what, praytell, did those folks at Siloam do to deserve getting buried under a ton of bricks?

You might not like it, but basically Jesus' answer is "stuff happens." Jesus isn't concerned with judging those still alive. He wants them, and us, to be concerned about what happens when we find ourselves before the one who can judge us in the life to come.

I don't want to get into what Martin Luther and others have called "works righteousness" and that debate at this point. It's too easy to make our faith little more than a transaction, where what happens to us now or later on is in response to our actions or way of life. Yes, there are things that can happen after long periods of engaging in certain habits. My own family tree has instances of terminal illness and death due to too much smoking or drinking or other activities.

I've also witnessed some who lived a good and healthy life who went through that same suffering, and any attempt to explain why gets lost in the fact that sometimes stuff just happens. It's not a question of good or evil that caused the event. The question of good or evil gets answered in the journey of everyday life.

And that is the point Jesus makes. It's not getting what you deserve, whether it be good or bad, despite our desire to see good things happen to good people, and the opposite when appropriate according to our own judgement of others. And while I have a friend who has what he calls "quick release karma," I also have a package of cocktail napkins that have printed on them, "dear karma, I have a list of people you've missed."

Some of you have read or heard Brian McLaren, a contemporary pastor and writer. He has a three-volume set of books describing his journey with a new friend. They talk about spiritual matters, and then their discussion turns to the point Jesus makes in today's Gospel.

McLaren's friend gives his view of the last judgement, and it's very different from the one presented on the wall of the Sistine Chapel. Basically, what he says is that when we stand before God, and God's gaze falls upon us, God looks for that image we are given in creation. God looks for that within us that is of God, and all else is instantly burned away. What remains is what is of God—what is still pronounced

good, for only that can live forever in God's presence. If there is nothing of God left, then life ends for us. And to be forever dead, outside God's presence, is hell.

Maybe one day each of us will discover whether that's true, whether it really happens that way. The first step toward that is to follow Jesus, and stop trying to judge why things happen the way they do.

Instead, when suffering comes our way, or we find ourselves with others who suffer, we pray that God will once again show up and lead us through the suffering into a new and changed life enjoyed in God's abundance. That is the message of the cross. And it's the hope of the resurrection that follows.