

Year C 3rd Sunday of Lent

March 20, 2022

Exodus 3.1-15; Psalm 63.1-18; 1 Corinthians 10.1-13; Luke 13.1-9

St. David's Church, 8 am Church and 9.15 Chapel and Livestream

Rev. Emily Zimbrick-Rogers

I Will Be with You

We come to you, O God, asking again and again that you would please reveal yourself as defender, deliverer, a faithful God who is with us. Amen.

In our gospel today, people bring current event stories to Jesus that represent the real problem of evil. Pilate was a ruthless dictator who both killed Jesus' neighbors or townspeople and maybe even his friends, and also desecrated the Jews' sacred worship. People are looking for an answer to this: Where is God in these murders? This religious tragedy?

Some might be asking Jesus also for a political answer, an nationalistic and anti-Roman response. Others might be asking Jesus for a statement about the character of God in the midst of suffering and judgment for sin for those who disrespect God's name. However, Jesus is a little disappointing to the crowd around him. Jesus refuses to get into a philosophical debate about politics and about the nature of God. He does say the important fact that this tragedy is *not* because the people deserved it or because the victims were worse sinners than other people. There's no answer; no explanation. Jesus just turns these questions

around to an opportunity for the listeners to repent, or turn again toward God, or the listeners might be caught unaware and not have more time to seek God.

We too are looking for answers to the problem of evil, suffering, and sin in our own day. Where is God in the horrible suffering and murders in the war in the Ukraine? The direct targeting of civilians, including children. We want God to act and intervene. We, like the people around Jesus, are asking God, please stop these horrible things. Yet this huge war is not the only tragedy we need answers to. As I read about the tower of Siloam falling, I thought about that apartment building collapse in Florida last year and about the recent housefire in public housing in Philadelphia that killed 12 people including 8 children. I also thought about more private tragedies like someone I know who is coming to terms with harmful things in their past.

The human world is not the only place we see brokenness and suffering. In the next part of this gospel, there's a little parable about a fig tree that is not bearing fruit. The owner of the property wishes to cut it down and remove it. The gardener asks for another year and plans to do fairly radical caretaking to see if the fig tree can produce fruit. Why is the fig tree not producing fruit? We do not know; perhaps there have been forces outside the fig tree's control that have led to a lack of fruitfulness or withering, a lack of health. There are many ways to read this

parable, but for our purposes today, I think we can say that the fig tree is suffering and needs help.

Perhaps we might imagine ourselves as this little scrawny ill fig tree. We want to flourish and be our best versions of ourselves—a fruitful tree. But there's something blocking us.

I think the parable of the fig tree and the tragedies Jesus is confronted with remind us that sometimes an individual or a community do not have the resources in themselves to flourish. When Jesus talks about repentance that's what he means—turn to God who is deliverer, helper, faithful who will provide a way for us to endure and to survive.

In all these trials, Jesus offers us any easy answers, but I am grateful for the lectionary compilers who gave us the good news we need to hear again and again in our Exodus passage, revealing the faithful character of God.

Exodus brings us to a different time of suffering for different people but the tragedy and brokenness in human institutions is sadly the same. The people at the time of Exodus are enslaved and suffering and crying out for deliverance. And in the midst of this God is not unaware and caring or disconnected.

What is amazing is that God calls regular human people into the holy work of deliverance and rescue. This is sacred ground, holy ground Moses and all God's children are set upon. This is one of the most mysterious things in our faith. God of

the universe, infinite in love and power, calls us humans to partnership to setting things right, and help our fellow humans and the created order to flourish.

And God's deliverance begins with God's promise of presence. I will be with you. **I will be with you.**

The untranslatable God that I am who I am the Adonai the Lord Yahweh this God is present and God's presence goes with Moses and all those suffering.

I'll be with you God says to Moses, an individual frightened man hiding out in the desert. I'll be with you, people of Israel, suffering under slavery.

I will be with you, Psalmist who is seeking God in a desert place whether that is a physical location, a spiritual time of wandering, or some kind of psychological distress.

I'll never leave you, God promises to the Corinthians who struggling in their own day to stay committed to Jesus and love one another and persevere in the trials they face. I will be faithful to you and whatever the brokenness of the world brings God promises.

I'll be with you Galileans who both were murdered and those who witnessed their deaths. I will be with you who died in the collapse of the tower and those who suffered under seeing it. I'll remain with you, little fig tree longing to be fruitful.

I will be with you, all people everywhere suffering in Ukraine or Afghanistan, Haiti, North Philadelphia, Norristown, or even right here in the private sufferings of the people of Wayne or Bryn Mawr.

All suffering is not the same, but God's promise of presence is all encompassing and universal. God's presence gives us strength to follow the examples of our ancestors like Moses who partnered with God to overturn oppression and lead people to freedom, or like the gardener to heal the soil and get our hands dirty in the dirt, digging deeply in the mud and taking the manure and putting it to beneficial use. Nothing is worthless in the hands of a healer. Because God is with us, freedom and fruit is just around the corner. God will be with you.

And in the name of one God, Creator, redeemer, sustainer, deliverer, and faithful helper. Amen.