

Sermon for Sunday, February 28, 2016  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's the third Sunday in Lent,  
the third Sunday  
traveling with Jesus  
on his journey  
towards Jerusalem,  
the third Sunday  
traveling with him  
on his journey  
to the cross.

It's a journey  
that in the gospel of Luke  
begins in earnest  
in chapter nine.  
Jesus goes up the mountain  
with his closest friends,  
and there  
the great prophets and leaders  
Moses and Elijah  
appear,  
and Jesus is caught up  
in the bright light of their presence,  
and when he comes back down  
something has changed.

And he begins to direct his steps  
towards Jerusalem,  
and begins to direct his thoughts  
towards his impending death.

And all the while, all the while  
he continues preaching and teaching and healing  
almost as if  
nothing has changed.  
Except that the opposition seems to be growing,  
people

less charmed  
by his miracles,  
and more interested  
in tripping him up,  
and there seems to be an urgency  
to his teaching,  
and he's less likely  
to mince words.

And today's reading all begins with a question.  
"What about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices?"

We don't know much  
about what his questioners  
are talking about.  
This particular incident  
didn't make it into the history books.  
But there are plenty like it.  
the Roman-Jewish historian Josephus  
who wrote about Jewish history  
later in the first century,  
Josephus  
reports that Pilate  
had disrupted a religious gathering of Samaritans  
on Mount Gerizim  
by slaughtering  
the participants,  
and killed many Jews  
who had opposed him  
when he appropriated money from the temple treasury  
to build an aqueduct in Jerusalem.  
But we don't know the details  
of this particular  
atrocity.  
Nor of the tragedy  
that Jesus responded with,  
eighteen people killed  
when the tower of Siloam fell on them.

We don't know the details

of these events,  
but we know the question.  
What about  
the thousands of ordinary people  
killed in the war in Syria  
where something like a quarter to a third of the more than quarter million or more who  
have died  
are civilians?  
What about the quarter million who died in the tsunami  
in 2004?  
What about the almost three thousand  
who died on 9/11,  
or the twenty children and six adults  
shot at Sandy Hook,  
or the people we know  
who have cancer?  
Why  
do bad things  
happen to ordinary  
people?

It's one of those questions  
we all want to know the answer to.

And we kind of want the answer to be,  
because they deserved it.  
What goes around  
comes around.  
Karma,  
where what we have done  
whether in this life  
or a previous one  
influences what happens to us now  
and in the future.  
Everyone gets  
their just desserts.

It's neat. It's logical. Above all,  
it's fair.

Because the alternative,  
the alternative is  
that it's not fair.  
That we live in a world  
where there are no rules.  
Where luck or chance  
or something like that  
determines what happens to us.  
Where we can't depend  
on anything.

We want an answer,  
just like the people with Jesus  
wanted an answer.

Why  
do bad things  
happen to ordinary  
people?

And guess what.  
Jesus doesn't  
answer.  
At least,  
not the way  
we want him to.

Nope, he says,  
it wasn't their fault.  
Not the Galileans  
killed when they were making their sacrifices.  
Not the Jerusalemites  
who died when a tower fell on them.  
It wasn't their fault.  
There is no answer  
that is neat  
and logical  
and fair.  
We live in a messy world.  
And I can't fix it,

at least not the way  
you want it to be fixed.  
But what I can do  
is help you  
to live in it.

And that's when  
what he says  
begins to get more difficult,  
at least for us.  
Because he says,  
no, they didn't die  
because of what they did.  
But don't flip that round.  
Don't assume  
that just because they did nothing  
to deserve what they got,  
that you can do anything you want  
and never have any consequences.  
God isn't stupid.

So pay attention.  
Pay attention to your own lives.  
Work out  
where you've messed up.  
And wherever, wherever  
you've turned away from God  
wherever  
you've done something  
that wouldn't make God proud of you,  
repent.  
Change your ways.  
Turn back to God.

Because there are consequences.  
It's one thing  
to die in ignorance.  
It's another thing  
to have had the opportunity  
to turn away from wrongdoing,

and to not take it.  
To have the chance  
of following Jesus  
and not  
be bothered.

And that's where  
the parable of the fig tree  
comes in.

A fig tree  
is planted  
in a vineyard.

And already  
we're in trouble.  
No one  
plants a fig tree  
in a vineyard.  
Fig trees  
like a lot of water  
and a lot of nutrients.  
And they have big leaves  
that make for heavy shade.  
You wouldn't want  
a fig tree  
in your vineyard.  
So here it is,  
an unwanted tree,  
and worse,  
it's not growing fruit.  
It looks like  
a waste  
of space.  
And so the owner tells his gardener  
to cut it down.  
But the gardener, who presumably has as his primary job  
keeping the grape vines,  
the gardener  
pleads for the tree.

Just give it  
one more chance.  
I'll give it some extra  
care and attention,  
I'll prune it and fertilize it  
and see what it produces.  
If nothing,  
okay, let's cut it down.  
But you never know - you could be making fig and grape preserves  
next season!

In other words, Jesus is saying,  
what if you  
are like that fig tree?  
What if you've  
been planted there in good soil,  
had the care of a gardener  
who loves you,  
and all you do  
is suck up water  
and grow leaves?  
It's time  
to be putting on  
some fruit.  
It doesn't matter  
if you feel like  
it's not quite the right time  
or not quite  
the right place.  
That's where you are.  
So get growing.  
And get bearing  
fruit.

God is patient  
and God is generous.  
But God won't wait  
forever.

Back in the early church

round about the fourth century,  
some people decided  
that baptism  
was so important,  
and was so effective  
in dealing with sin,  
that the best thing  
would be to delay it.  
The later you were baptized  
the more of your life's sin  
would be washed away  
and the greater the chance  
of you making it to heaven.  
The Emperor Constantine  
seems to have been one of those people.  
In spite of having seen a vision of Christ,  
in spite of making Christianity  
the official religion  
of his empire,  
he waited upwards of twenty years  
and didn't get baptized  
until he was on  
his deathbed.  
Luckily  
he wasn't hit by a stray sword in battle,  
and didn't catch any of the ordinary illnesses  
that might have killed him suddenly and unexpectedly.  
But he took a bit of a risk.

Don't take that risk, says Jesus.  
You don't know what's ahead of you.  
Sort yourself out with God NOW.  
Turn your life around.  
Ask for forgiveness.  
And then get growing. Get bearing fruit.  
Do the work that God has called you to do.  
Not because  
it will protect you.  
But because that's who  
you were made to be,

that's what  
you were made to do.

And now, lets get down to brass tacks.  
We have a great church here at St James.  
We're caring, we're friendly,  
we love one another.

We shouldn't have  
to beg for people to serve on vestry. We shouldn't have  
to beg for people to be warden.  
We shouldn't have to beg for money to make the budget, or repair the roof, or whatever.  
We shouldn't have to beg  
for people to share their faith with our children,  
or visit our homebound parishioners.  
God has given us  
everything we need to do God's work here.  
We just have  
to do it.  
We're a bunch of fig trees.  
And we need to get  
bearing fruit.

Not because we feel guilty,  
or because we're pressured into it.  
But because we heard Jesus say,  
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, "  
and we heard him say, "love your neighbor as yourself,"  
and we promised,  
we promised  
in baptism,  
to turn to Christ,  
To follow him.  
To do what he commands.

So come on.  
Let's do it.  
Now.