

Luke 13:1-17, 31-35

Since descending from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem as he heads to his death on a cross. And as he journeys, his followers want him to answer the questions we always want God to answer for us too – why do bad things happen to good people? Apparently some people had died in Siloam when a tower collapsed on them – a story that reminds us of deaths from earthquakes, shootings that seem to be plaguing our society, or people who die too young from cancer, etc. – people who were just going about their lives when it all fell apart. Did they deserve to die? Had they done something wrong?

But Luke's other illustration isn't as clear. Some Galileans had been murdered by Pilate. The description is that their blood was mingled with their sacrifice, a most unusual event. First, they were in the temple in Jerusalem, because that's the only place a good Jew would have been making sacrifices.

Second, this particular atrocity had political and not just religious implications. The Roman authorities normally left the religious life alone. They may have taxed the Jews and kept them from civic and cultural freedom, but they tended to leave their religion alone. But in this story, which is only recorded in Luke, Pilate had people murdered in the Temple as they are making sacrifice, mixing their blood with the sacrificial blood – desecrating sacrilege.

So this illustration may have just been about the first question – why do bad things happen to good people – or it may have been intended to stir up Jesus'

nationalistic fervour. In any case, Jesus, on his way to the Cross event, had been calling people to repent and to prepare for the transformation of the world that was about to take place, yet he takes the time to address the misconceptions behind their questions. The common assumption of people then, and probably of people now, is that when bad things happen, we have somehow done something to deserve it. God is punishing us for our own sins or for the sins of our ancestors.

Jesus stops them in their tracks. “Do you think that because these people suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than the other Galileans?” Well, when he puts it that way, it doesn’t sound quite right. But maybe that is what he is really exposing – perhaps our underlying thoughts when bad things happen to other people are really arrogance – “Those poor people ... they must have done something to deserve it. That could never happen to me ... ” Most of us, hopefully don’t consciously think or believe that.

So Jesus calls us to fight the tendency of our culture to blame things on someone. Whether we’re blaming Pilate, or the engineers who designed the tower of Siloam, or the Terrorists, or blaming video games, or blaming a President or Prime Minister or ruling party – we want to be able to blame things on somebody ... anybody.

But Jesus won’t let us stay there. Good people do die in bad accidents and from cancer. Bad people do live to be 100 and die in their sleep, and bad people also die in bad accidents and suffer illnesses. But blaming Pilate doesn’t change the

fact that life is fragile, beautiful, and uncertain. Blaming Pilate doesn't change the real issue.

“Do you really think those people are worse sinners than any of the rest of you?” Jesus asks. “Whether you die when a tower collapses, or die quietly in your bed, don't ask the wrong question. The real issue is repentance. Yes, life is fragile and short, so don't worry about the righteousness of your neighbour. Worry about your own relationship with God. That ought to keep you busy for some time.”

And then Jesus goes on to talk about a fig tree. This fig tree has been in a man's vineyard for three years, which is plenty of time for a fig tree to start making figs, but it is barren. It is not doing its job. “Cut it down!”, the owner says – a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Property is valuable, so if something isn't producing as it should, you get rid of it and plant something else. But the gardener argues for the unrepentant fig tree. “One more year. If I just spread some manure around it, I'm sure it will produce figs.”

This may not be very good gardening advice, but it is a great illustration of the faithfulness of God. because God, like a gardener, gifts us with mercy beyond measure. Long after we should be moved out of the garden, God for reasons only God can understand, continues to prune us, continues to nurture us, continues to have faith in our potential.

So, when Jesus confronts the people about the Galileans and the Tower of Siloam folks, he tells them the parable of the fig tree and then asks, “what kind of fig

tree are you? Are you producing fruit, or are you just taking up space?” We want to ask, “What will keep us safe?” God wants us to be asking, “What will give us life so we can bear fruit?” We ask the wrong questions. And maybe the fig tree story is to remind us to ask the right ones. Because the truth is this – if God were in the business of handing out punishment as consequence for our behaviour — none of us would be standing. The vineyard wouldn’t have a single fig tree left in it.

Thankfully, God and God’s unfathomable mercy keep our little fig trees still standing, still striving to be faithful disciples. So, our repentance does matter. Repentance, or turning back to God, should call us back to living for God, for standing up for justice, for actively seeking God’s kingdom on earth.

The fig tree parable should also be a reminder to us as people who labour in the vineyards. We are called to tend to the garden, to pull weeds, to add manure, to do the labour – but to also remember that the harvest isn’t ours. We don’t get to be the people who determine which fig trees are worthy. We are not in control of this harvest, or of God’s kingdom. Thank God that we aren’t the ones in charge. But oh, how we wish we were!

In the omitted verses, following the fig tree parable, Jesus causes or continues to cause a ruckus. He has healed a bent over woman on the Sabbath and then shamed his critics with his response to their complaint. And shamed critics end up being angry critics. He also offered up some difficult teachings about narrow ways, and the first being last. Then he compared the kingdom of God to yeast and to a

mustard seed, something that starts small and then becomes a giant, probably threatening Rome.

Jesus is picking a fight. He is tired of quietly submitting to injustice. And at that very hour, some Pharisees come to him to warn him that Herod wants to kill him. We don't always think of "helpful" when we think of Pharisees. They seem to be an odd choice to bring warning. Since when have they been concerned for Jesus' safety?

Maybe they were sincerely concerned for Jesus' life. But we can also hear their comment in the voice of the annoying kid on the playground who tells you "I've told the teacher and she's coming and then you are going to be in a lot of trouble, which I will really enjoy watching."

In either case, they bring a warning to Jesus. He has gone too far. He has made too many people angry. He has upset the status quo one too many times. There is a price to be paid for demanding justice, for refusing to play Rome's game, for healing all those people and for refusing to be limited by how we think the world is supposed to work.

Herod is paying attention. The system of oppression, of injustice, of un-health, and of un-creativity will not stand idly by while Jesus exposes its evil. It will fight back. It will kill him. And its agent is Herod. And we are told Herod wants to kill Jesus.

But even now, Jesus won't play that game. He refuses to be threatened, or

quieted down. He responds with “you tell that FOX I’m busy. I’ve got people to heal, and work to do. Do not have time for that snake, I mean weasel, I mean fox, right now.” Who wants to be the Pharisee to report that comment back to Herod? Jesus has given Herod all the time he is willing to give him, because Herod is not worth his time. Herod is just a flunkie for Rome. Herod is a small matter compared to the Kingdom of God. And Jesus moves on to talk about Jerusalem. He reminds us where he is headed. He reminds us what happens to prophets. He reminds us we don’t always welcome God’s messengers when they show up.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned. And you will never see me again until you say, ‘Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

But even as he reminds them of painful truths and tries to prepare them for what is still to come, he does it with love. One could understand if he called Jerusalem a bunch of foxes as he labelled Herod, since they kill all their prophets. But Jerusalem gets a different metaphor. “How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” Herod is the Fox. We are the baby chicks.

This, is a colourful and intriguing metaphor for God - one that is easy to imagine - a beautiful image of being sheltered under God’s wings. The Psalmist

says, "God will cover you with his feathers. The Lord will shelter you with his wings." Imagine God as a mother hen, sitting on you to keep you safe from foxes and weasels and other barnyard predators.

But we resist that shelter - illustrating the great struggle between God and humanity. God seeks safety, beauty, and life for us. We choose danger, independence, and freedom. And so Jesus offers this lament.

Jerusalem. Jerusalem. How I wish things were different. How I wish you weren't going to hand me over to the Fox, because who then will be left to shelter you under their wings? Do you not realize how vulnerable you are, with your little chicken wings and downy fluffy feathers? Why don't you believe me when I tell you these things?

Luke sees Jesus as a martyred prophet, killed as one who stands up to injustice, but also killed as someone who wishes there were another option. You'll see this in the passion narrative. As Luke tells the story, Jesus has his eyes open on the way to the cross, but that doesn't make him like what he sees.

We can hear that in this passage. Jesus is willing to do what needs to be done, but there is a wistfulness in his comments. Jesus would love nothing more than to be that smiling Jesus with happy children and baby lambs, keeping us safe and sheltering us under his wings. But that is not the world in which Jesus finds himself. Instead of being in a tranquil, bucolic farmyard, he is frantically trying to keep the fox out of the hen house while the baby chickens are running around

helping the fox bring about their own destruction.

The challenge of Lent is to accept our own responsibility for this broken world in which we live. As we follow Jesus on his approach to the cross, look around our barnyard. Are we seeking the praise and attention of the foxes who want to bring us harm? Are we seduced by their worldly power, their glossy coats, their celebrity status when they tell us their lies?

Rome can save you. Unlock the gate. You don't need God. Come out from under his wings. Where do you see yourself in this metaphor? It's comforting to imagine yourself as a happy little chick, content to be in God's care. But perhaps you're more likely digging under the fence, trying to find a way to go join the foxes.

If Luke's image of fox and mother hen doesn't resonate with us, then maybe God as a shepherd might? Or God as a rock? Or a fortress? Or a wind rustling the leaves on the trees? Perhaps a mighty warrior? Or a Father? These images of God can invite us into new ways of seeing ourselves and our relationships with God.

The difficulties of our world sometimes make metaphors a safer way of approaching our own brokenness. We can't really bear the weight of our actual complicity in the brokenness of the world. But a metaphor can help us see it from a safer distance at first, which might help us take stock of our own relationships in the world.

So, whether you are a chick taking shelter under wing, or a lamb being

gathered back into the flock; whether you're a mountain goat seeking shelter from the wind on the leeward side of a big rock, or a patient under care of the great physician; know that the God who created us is calling us to turn toward God, even as Jesus laments over Jerusalem and our brokenness. Whatever your metaphor for God, let us turn, again and again and again, toward the sheltering wings of God.

Amen.