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Trinity Episcopal Church

Exodus 3:1 - 15

Psalm 63: 1 – 8

1 Corinthians 10: 1 – 13

Luke 13: 1 – 9

“Therefore, I have gazed upon you in your holy place, that I might behold your power and your glory...for you have been my helper, and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice.”

So writes the psalmist who is seeking a compassionate communion and fellowship with God. Some translations use sanctuary, or refuge, instead of holy place. The psalmist expresses a strong longing for God, and sees the human-divine relationship like that of a baby bird (or perhaps a developing egg) being covered and protected by the wings of its mother. The psalmist emphasizes the mutuality of the divine-human relationship, with one’s very soul clinging to God, and God’s right hand, the hand of strength, upholding, clasping, calming, steadying, assuring that person.

It’s a picture of closeness to God, of being in a right relationship with God, of walking humbly with one’s God. It’s the ideal, but it isn’t exactly the picture painted by both Paul and Luke in today’s lessons. In fact, it seems pretty much the opposite of what Paul and Luke describe as the life that most of us lead. Both of them write about what life is really like in this world.

As opposed to being closely connected to God, Paul and Luke both write about what separates us from God - the “s” word – sin. Paul writes to the church in Corinth. It’s part of a larger section of the letter in which Paul addresses the church’s question about whether it is right to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. The underlying issue for the church is how far individual freedom goes within the bounds of Christianity. “What is the relationship between individual freedom and corporate responsibility?” they want to know. Though Paul would never be one to boast, of course, he offers his own apostolic behavior as a positive example of self-restraint. Then, he uses Israel, God’s chosen people, as an example of what not to do. Rather than exercising restraint, Paul says, Israel has been behaving self-indulgently. They have been giving in to their own desires and following their own will. As a result, they have become overly self-confident, self-willed and arrogant, relying on themselves instead of on God.

Paul understands that when the Israelites passed through the Red Sea with Moses, it was a ‘type’ – a prefiguring – of baptism. And when they wandered through the wilderness, they ate the manna and drank the water out of the rock, again, a prefiguring, this time of the Eucharist. Paul interprets the Hebrew Scriptures through the lens of his Christian experience.

Apparently, some of the Corinthians have concluded that their baptism, their initiation into the Church, and their participation in the Eucharist somehow guarantee them a cozy position with God. They see themselves enjoying what the psalmist describes in terms of the divine-human relationship. By receiving the sacraments, the Corinthians have become like Israel, overly self-confident. So Paul reminds them that even though all of Israel shared in the experience of the Exodus, and all received the same spiritual food, they still all remained vulnerable. For effect, Paul contrasts “all” and “most.” All experienced the same saving grace of God, all were sustained by the same spiritual nourishment, yet

God was displeased with *most* of them. They all experienced divine deliverance, yet most of them caved in terms of their willfulness, their self-indulgent behavior, their arrogance.

Paul warns the Corinthians about the vices of indulgence that arise as a result of failing to practice self-restraint, and about being overly self-confident. And then Paul reassures them. He tells the Corinthians that the temptations they face are the same temptations that confront everyone. And he reminds them that just like the Israelites were given a means of deliverance, so the Corinthians can be confident that God will deliver them as well. Paul reminds them, and through them us, that God's universal faithfulness is always greater than the universality of temptation.

One of the great recurring themes in the Bible is that the line that separates the sinner from the saint is really no line at all. [Rick Morley] And the theme of repentance, that is, turning and reorienting our direction towards God, occurs more often in Luke's Gospel than with any other New Testament writer, including Paul. In the passage we hear today, Jesus begins with two statements that set the stage for the parable of the barren fig tree. They, in fact, not only serve to introduce the parable, they provide commentary on it. Jesus' statements are exactly parallel in their structure, and they each end with very same pronouncement: "but unless you turn to God, you will all perish as they did," referring to both the Galileans killed by Pilate in the Temple and the people on whom the tower of Siloam fell. The subtle differences in the two statements combine to be inclusive of all. The first one concerns Galilean pilgrims, just like Jesus and his disciples, who are from the northern part of Israel, and the second one is about the Jerusalemites, people from the southern part of Israel, or Judea. Together, Jesus is speaking to all of Israel. The first reference has to do with human-caused tragedy. The second with a natural disaster. In that, Jesus is incorporating all violence and suffering that strikes without reason or meaning.

Jesus is confronting an age old belief that there is a direct correlation between sin and suffering. It's the question in the whole book of Job. Some people still believe it, and ascribe God's judgment on people whenever a huge calamity strikes – Hurricane Katrina, or 9/11. However, Jesus clearly denies that there is any link between sin and suffering. And the ultimate event which puts to rest the belief that the suffering and the guilty are one and the same comes with the cross at Golgotha, where the one without sin suffers and dies at our hands. Prosperity and good health are not evidence of divine favor; poverty and suffering are NOT signs of divine wrath.

In his response, Jesus refutes any such attempts at judging and labeling and blaming. Not only are they futile, they direct attention away from the real issue at hand, the need everyone has for living in a right relationship with God. Right relationship being defined as orienting ourselves towards God, no matter what. As trusting God, come what may.

The story of the fig tree points to the opportunity for fruitfulness in all, including those who seem completely devoid of even the possibility of bearing fruit. In looking at the parable, there are various allegorical possibilities. The fig tree is in the owner's vineyard. In Hebrew scriptures, the vineyard is often a symbol for all of Israel. But for us, it just might be the church, and the fig tree me or you. The owner is often understood to be God. Then the gardener is Jesus, who intercedes on our

behalf. Mercy is exercised, a stay is given, but it comes with a warning about a limited time. Perhaps God will give yet another chance to the tree again, but we're not guaranteed that.

But what if the owner is us and the fig tree represents our failed attempts to bear fruit. Then, out of frustration, out of impatience, out of willfulness and arrogance, out of self-denial, we wish to destroy it. Perhaps we want all of the evidence erased so that we can start afresh with a young sapling, a blank slate. But then Jesus or God as gardener shows us what patience, grace and working with the lives we have, can look like. God shows us what is possible if we plant our lives firmly in the humus (the same root from which humility and humor comes), and ground ourselves in creation, in the nourishment that the Creator provides. God shows us what might happen if we dig deeper, loosening up our roots in order to stretch ourselves and change old patterns. God shows us that it is absolutely possible for us to bear good fruit, even when we feel the world has given up on us, or we have given up on ourselves. But again, there is the need for urgency, to make use of the limited time we have.

To both the stories about the Galileans and the people at Siloam, Jesus' reply begins with "no, I tell you, BUT..." That one word, "but," indicates a u-turn away from contemplating the sins and the fates of others towards thinking about our own sinfulness (our brokenness, our missing the mark) and about our own fate in life. Jesus turns the conversation around to help us focus on our own need to change and to turn toward God.

Martin Luther, the German theologian, said that the life of a Christian is a life of daily repentance. By that, he meant a life of daily turning to God in order to nurture our divine human relationship, to examine where we fall short, to acknowledge our dependence on God, to attempt to discern God's will. And then, turning back again from God to go into the world. The result of the turning is the fruit we bear: the actions we take, the words we speak, the acts of love and forgiveness in which we participate. The gardener gives us a reprieve, which reminds us that God is a God of grace and forbearance, a God of steadfast love, a God of second chances. [Dr. John Fairless]

Lent as a refuge. Lent as a time to turn back to God, to rest in the shelter of God's wings. Lent as an opportunity to turn away from the things of this world whose siren songs tend to lead us away from God. Lent as a time to deepen our relationship with God in ways that will continue to direct us beyond Lent. There are 24 more days in Lent. How will we use Lent as a refuge, what will we yet do to turn more nearly back to God and to seek a compassionate communion and fellowship with God? How will we use this limited time so that we can go back into the world and bear much fruit for God? +