



St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Delray Beach
3 Lent - Year C - March 7, 2010
Exodus 3:1-15; Ps. 63: 1 - 8; Luke 13:1-9
Preacher: The Reverend Canon William H. Stokes, *Rector*

"Do you think that because those Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all those other Galileans?" (Luke 13:2)

In the wake of the devastating Earthquake in Haiti in January, the response by the world community was compassionate and incredibly generous. Immediate aid began to pour in from all over the world. The hundreds of physicians, nurses, rescue and recovery people that poured into Haiti – including from Delray Beach – was astounding and inspiring and a witness to the goodness of humanity and the love and altruism which is such a wondrous part of the human experience.

Of course, there were also displays of human malevolence and stupidity. One of the grossest displays of ignorance was that of the Reverend Pat Robertson on his *700 Club* in the wake of the Haiti disaster. Robertson attempted to explain why the Haiti Earthquake had occurred.

He said, and I quote, "They were under the heel of the French, you know Napoleon the third and whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said 'We will serve you if you will get us free from the prince.' True story. And so the devil said, 'Ok it's a deal.' And they kicked the French out. The Haitians revolted and got something themselves, free. But ever since they have been cursed by one thing after another."¹

I have to confess, I am a little curious to know just how Mr. Robertson was so familiar with this conversation between the Devil and Haiti? He reports it as if he had been a first person observer. Was he present?

Not only did he show his ignorance of history when he stated that Haiti "was under the heel of Napoleon III, or whatever," – Haiti achieved its independence before Napoleon III was born² – Robertson's theology is horrendous. It's ill-considered, reckless and just plain dumb. But it's not surprising. It is just one more thing to a long list of dumb and reckless things Robertson has said over the years. These are an embarrassment to Christians and Christianity.

Still, Robertson does represent a very common human impulse: The desire to understand why things happen, and especially things that are troubling. In the wake of catastrophes like the Earthquake in Haiti, or the more recent earthquake in Chile, accompanied by such enormous loss of life and the incomprehensible grief, injuries and pain suffered by others, human beings want to know why. They especially want to know why if they believe in God. Why did this happen? More important, human beings want to know where God is in all of this? Did God cause it? If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, why didn't God prevent it? Many human

beings ask these questions in the wake of all kinds of different occurrences; not just natural disasters, but also tragedies that have a human cause, like wars or human acts of violence. People often ask, why did those who were victims have to die? What did they do to deserve that fate? Why didn't God step in?

In the wake of a diagnosis of terminal illness; or when a tragedy is experienced, such as the death of someone loved, how many people ask, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this? God where are you?" It is precisely these kinds of questions, these very human questions, which are behind the beginning of today's Gospel reading from Luke.

At that very time, there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.....(Luke 13:1).

We don't know what the incident that Luke is referring to is. There is no historical record of anything that fits this description. This doesn't mean it didn't happen. Pontius Pilate had a reputation for cruelty, and in fact, later in his career, after the crucifixion of Jesus, he was recalled to Rome for his brutality to the Jews.

Although we have no historical record of the incident Luke's refers to, we can surmise that Pilate had some Galileans killed while they were at the Temple worshipping. "Why did this happen?" some people question Jesus. "They were in the Temple? In the holy place, offering sacrifices, sacrifices to God, for God's sake! Why did it happen? What had they done to deserve this?"

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans, Jesus responds to them. No I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them (another incident of which there is no historical record) – do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (Luke 13:2 – 5).

Behind the question of Jesus interrogators, "why did this happen to them?" is an understanding that was dominant in the time of Jesus, and one which still holds sway today. It is an understanding that when something bad happens to people, they, or one of their forebears, must have done something bad, must have sinned, to deserve their fate.

Those who have studied the Old Testament with me know this as the "deuteronomic view" because it reflects the dominant stance of the authors of material in the book of Deuteronomy and much of the rest of the Old Testament. It's a view that we sum up with a phrase by an old friend and Bible student with me, Ernie Reinhold of Palm Beach, who described it as "do good get good, do bad get bad." Yes, that's the Deuteronomic view. Pat Robertson is a Deuteronomist -- *do good get good, do bad get bad.*

If the people of Haiti or Chile are suffering because of the effects of the earthquake, this viewpoint states, they must have done something bad. This stance cannot comprehend the possibility that sometimes, oftentimes, terrible things happen to good people who did nothing to deserve it; just as there were, I am confident, many good and faithful people in Haiti and Chile, who were innocents; who did nothing to deserve what happened, who became victims nonetheless. The Deuteronomists just can't deal with this possibility.

In his response, Jesus rejects the deuteronomic view....He makes it clear, neither those Galileans nor those killed by the Tower of Siloam were any worse than anyone else. Jesus doesn't attempt to explain the problem of innocent suffering, but he clearly rejects the dominant deuteronomic view. What Jesus does do, is reject the cruelty and callousness that is behind such

questions, as cruelty and callousness were behind Pat Robertson's ill-considered statement concerning Haiti.

Instead, Jesus turns the tables on his questioners: "Don't you concern yourself about questions of the state of grace or sinfulness of those others," Jesus says to them, "worry about yourself; worry about your own state of grace; consider your own sinfulness....Repent, and turn to God, or you will suffer God's judgment."

Two times, Jesus calls his questioners to repent. As one of our clergy colleagues said when we met together this week and discussed this passage, "When Jesus says something twice, perhaps we ought to listen." *Unless you repent, you will perish as they did...*(Luke 13:3).

As Fred Craddock observes in his commentary on Luke's Gospel, "this passage is not only characteristically Lucan, but it has no parallels in other Gospels."³ Luke's Gospel contains many calls for repentance, that is, for turning to God. It is, Craddock, notes, a theme "more frequent in Luke more than any other New Testament writer."⁴ He states, "for Luke, the gospel is the offer of repentance and forgiveness."⁵ And the two themes – repentance and forgiveness — are present in today's reading.

The account of Jesus being questioned about the incident of the Galileans and calling his hearers to repentance is followed immediately by a parable of divine patience and forbearance, the parable of the fig tree.

It is an intriguing little parable. It helps to know that in the New Testament, the fig tree is often a symbol for Israel. It also helps to know that a concern for the New Testament church was the state of grace of Israel, that is, of those Jews who had not repented and not come to accept Jesus as Lord and Messiah....Would God judge them and punish them. This question, might be a part of the dynamic behind the parable of the fig tree. A fig tree figures elsewhere in the Gospels – in Matthew and Luke – where the tree is not treated so gently by Jesus.⁶ But here it is treated gently.

I read the parable of the fig tree as an allegory. The fig tree stands, probably for Israel, but could stand for any unrepentant sinner. God has planted a fruit tree in a vineyard, and God's desire is that it be fruitful and productive. But the tree is not and because it is not, it is using up the soil -- the nutrients and minerals -- and could deplete things and have a negative impact on his vineyard. The vineyard owner has been patient, watching this tree for three years, but his patience has worn thin. He calls his gardener to cut it down. The gardener, urges more patience. "*Sir, let it along for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, then you can cut it down*" (Luke 13:8 – 9).

In the allegory, the gardener is Jesus....Jesus, the one who was sent by the Father, by the vineyard owner, to intercede for us, to call us to repentance, to call us into the Father's love, even if he has to dig around us a little bit, and throw some manure on us occasionally to bring this about.

We have been challenged by a lot of devastating images of suffering and pain and cruelty. For many, this leads to questioning: Where is God in all of this? I do not think there are easy answers to these kinds of questions.

The Creation in which we all live and move and have our being is wondrous and God created it as good. God also created it, and created us with a radical freedom. Because of this radical freedom, both wonderful things happen, and awful things happen. It is the nature of freedom and so, with the possibility of happiness comes the possibility of sadness; with the possibility of health comes the possibility of sickness; with the possibility of life comes the possibility, indeed inevitability, of death for us all, at least in this life.

Because God created the world with this kind of radical freedom, theologians suggest that God is “self-limited” in interfering with it. I accept this. There is a mystery to the problem of suffering and evil that is beyond the scope of our knowing.

But I can say this: It is my most passionate conviction that God is Love (1 John 4:16), and because this is my most passionate conviction, I do not believe that God causes devastation like the earthquake in Haiti, and I absolutely reject any understanding which would suggest that God punishes in this way. God is love.

The message of the cross, the message of the crucified Christ is, that if you want to locate God in suffering, look there....look at Calvary...look at Christ crucified. There God is....There is God’s love....God is weeping. God is suffering.

When an earthquake occurs, or a Tsunami, or an act of violence, or the evil of war, or the diagnosis of terminal cancer, be assured, God is with the sufferer, holding the suffering, embracing them, loving them, crying over them, as I know God did in the wake of the earthquakes in Haiti and in Chile.

But there is more....God is not impotent in all of this....God is present....God is present in the doctors without borders, in the nurses, in the recovery workers, in the people who dig with their hands to pull people out of rubble. Yes, that is where God is.

And God is present, too, in the relief that pours in when people of compassion see the suffering, and hurt with those who suffer and in deep empathy respond with money and food and clothes, because God created us good, and wired us to be loving and compassionate.

Moreover, God is victorious over suffering....That’s the message after Calvary, that’s the message of Easter which we celebrate in just a few short weeks....God and God’s love triumphs over suffering and pain and God’s love wins....And because God’s love wins, we are invited to live in God’s eternity if only we will turn to God.

Today’s Gospel reading is about God’s judgment, but it more about God’s mercy; a mercy which is broad and deep and high....God’s desire, as it says elsewhere in Scripture, is not for the death of sinners, but rather that they turn from their sins and be saved (Ezekiel 18:23). That is what this season of Lent is about....It’s about turning to God, God who is love, with our whole hearts and minds and strength....It’s about turning to him and being saved....Take advantage of this season...Take advantage of this invitation....Repent....Be saved....Fall in love with God anew.

¹ See Pat Robertson: Haiti “Cursed” after “Pact with the Devil” on CBS News website at http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-12017-504083.html

² Haitian Independence was declared on January 1, 1804, Napoleon III was born on April 20, 1808.

³ Craddock, Fred B. *Luke: Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) p. 167.

⁴ Craddock, 167

⁵ Craddock, 167

⁶ See Mark 11:12 – 14, 20 – 21 and Matthew 21:18-20