

Lent 3, Year C, Exodus 3:1-15 Psalm 103: 1-11 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13 Luke 13: 1-9
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Yesterday – as Amy & Bill and Olof will testify – I was down at Nichols Brothers taking pictures of the loading of the new ferry superstructure on to a barge – it’ll be taken to Seattle and put on it’s hull, now complete, and in the not too distant future we’ll have a larger ferry going back and forth between Clinton and Mukilteo.

As I was moving around I overheard a conversation between two people talking about the Florida sink hole. If you’ve seen the news you’ll know that a sink hole opened up under a house, and one person asleep in bed – along with the rest of his bedroom – went down into it....30 feet down. That’s a long way! And they still haven’t found him – “missing, presumed dead”.

The folk over at the ferry fell silent, then one said: “I wonder what he did to deserve that?”

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When bad things happen to a person it has to be because they deserve it. They must have done something and this is divine retribution for their sin. Our culture is really good at sending this message; when something bad happens to a person the message is: “it’s your fault; get over it”.

And if they don’t – or, our culture says, “won’t” – get over it we dismiss them as ne’er-do-wells; good-for-nothing people who are just lazy or on-the-make. At least some of the efforts at welfare reform are based on this view: the single mother, the homeless youth, the person with a different skin color are told to pull themselves together, get a job, become a productive citizen. Or else.

It’s all your fault. The assumption is that we live in a universe of rewards and punishments, and so when bad things happen, we only brought it on ourselves.

And, of course, sometimes we do bring things on ourselves! I think that’s why this view of reality has so much legs – it is, at least partly, true.

It’s certainly a very ancient view of how the world works, which I believe is independent of any particular faith tradition, though it’s snuck it’s way into many, including our own Judeo-Christian tradition – parts of both Testaments seem wedded to it.

The story of Adam and Eve seems to support it – after their actions they are, forever, exiled from Paradise, with the punishment of labor and work “by the sweat of your brow” imposed as a result.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, likewise says “this action” (sexual immorality) resulted in this punishment (death for 23,000)..

Those wondering about the cause of brutal murder of some Galilean Jews by Pilate in the Temple itself, or why certain people were killed when a stone tower fell over, likewise echo the view, or

Jesus wouldn't have used the events as an example for what he was saying.

Yet there are also eloquent biblical cries that the world does not operate that way – alternate beliefs that present a different world-view. Think, for instance, of the Book of Job – where despite Job's upright – righteous – life, he's afflicted with hideous losses. In the face of these losses Job carries on a long verbal interchange with three friends (Job 3-28). Who say that he must have done something wrong to deserve his suffering. Against them, Job claims that he is innocent, and we know that he is.

Today's Exodus story also stands in stark contrast to this "it's your own fault" view.

Moses is a murderer – he killed a guard to escape Egypt and slavery, leaving his brother and sister Israelites behind under Pharaoh's harsh yoke. That's two actions that we could cast as wrong: murder, and abandoning your community in it's time of need for "the good life" somewhere else.

Moses, however, has an encounter that disrupts his smugness about his situation. It comes with this bush in his path that's burning – a metaphor no doubt for what is obviously and at the least an encounter with his past – with the guilt that must have come from his murder of the guard, and his abandoning of all those whom he loved – and, more importantly, who loved him.

If the world works on reward and punishment then God should punish Moses on the spot– right? Instead, in the giving of God's name, Moses is told that the story of our lives is different: "I Am" can best be translated as "I am the one who is there for you". "I am the one who is there for you". While God might be a God of judgement, Exodus tells us, God is not a God of punishment, but of compassion and love.

But something has to change – Yahweh says. Moses has to shift his focus away from himself, from his hopes and his fears, and work **on behalf of** God and **for** his community.

Jesus' stands in that tradition with his message to his listeners : those poor Jews murdered by the Romans, or those others unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time near the Siloam tower – yeah, sure, some of them might have done bad things, but while God might be a God of judgement, God is not a God of punishment, but of compassion and love.

He then follows on with a story about the failure of fig trees to bear fruit – the fig tree parable was a metaphor for the failure of national leaders to understand the importance of community over self-interest – so I suppose we might want to say to our elected representatives, "Listen up"!

So here we are, thinking about others! Moses, Jesus, a few dead people in Egypt and Jerusalem. Thousands of years ago. What's the message to us?

The way we look at the world will directly affect the way we look at the people around us and how we live.

When the focus is on “bad people”, on reward and punishment, on being “Sinners in the hands of an angry God” to quote a famous sermon by the great Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, we’re easily swept away in all the bad stuff, and end up with a very negative view of human beings **and** God. We feel despairing and powerless and want to seize back control over our lives.

Jesus’ central message for us today from this story is, I believe, this: to ask “why is this happening?”, “what did he do to deserve that?”, is to ask the wrong question.

THE REAL QUESTIONS ARE THESE: “how can I model and advance our compassionate and loving God’s presence and reign in this world?” At least part of the answers have to do with how much we’re willing to place the good of community at the center of our lives, AND how much we’re willing to embrace the goodness that the first creation story in Genesis tells us lies at the very heart of All That Is – life, each other, God, the universe, everything: that it is good, very good; that God is good, very good; that we are good, very good, even when we make bad choices, even when bad things happen.

Finding that goodness is part of the journey we make throughout our lives.

So here’s a choice for you: are you going to live your lives in fear of punishment, or in joy that in God all things have been made – and continue to be made – new AND good, as Jesus reminds us. Remember? If we live out of this vision of goodness and work for it, he said, we will receive “[a] good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over”....God’s abundance readily available for all who are willing to look and to embrace the possibilities offered to those who have eyes to see the true nature of God and life, and everything. AMEN.