

Third Sunday in Lent – Year C – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 3.20.22
Exodus 3: 1-15, Psalm 63: 1-8, 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13, Luke 13: 1-9

One cannot listen to the Gospel read a moment ago and not think of the events that have happened and continue to happen in the Ukraine. Some people came to Jesus, the teacher, and asked the question all human beings ask in times of distress. Why? Why did the Galileans die at the hands of Pilate, die in the very act of worshiping God? Why were there people crushed when the wall at Siloam fell? In our age of science, reason and logic, it seems evident that a clear effect must have at its root an identifiable cause, which leaves us with the conundrum of why God allows such things.

The question is often phrased, “why do bad things happen to good people?” If God is truly all powerful and just, why does God let these things happen? Worse, does God cause these things to happen as punishment for sin, for unfaithfulness or for the actions of others which we cannot control? Presiding Bishop Michael Curry remembers as a child hearing the adults around him comment when minor misfortune befell someone; “You ain’t been living right.”

The question of the connection between sin and suffering was prominent in the Hebrew Scripture, what we call the Old Testament. The theology of the rabbis held that “...obedience to the Torah brought blessings, but disobedience brought a curse.” It was a simple and understandable answer to the question of why suffering; and seemingly it could be backed up by ample evidence in the life of the community of Jews.

Jesus, in speaking to the people who came to him with this question, Jesus was clear. “No I tell you, but...”. Jesus is clear, the suffering is real and not to be dismissed *but* it is not explained as the punishment of a capricious or wrathful God. What happened to those Galileans whom Pilate killed, and what is happening to those who are being wounded, dispossessed and killed in the Ukraine is not the will or desire of God. It is the undeniable fact that there is evil in the world. Which brings us to the reality of human agency. Abraham Heschel, a renowned Jewish theologian has stated the problem clearly. “The greatest challenge to the biblical language [is] how to reconcile in words the awareness of God’s transcendence with {God’s} overwhelming {presence in the world} and concern {for it}.” Sin and evil do not inevitably lead to punishment but sin and evil do inevitable lead to consequences. Those consequences become the opportunities for people of faith to act as agents of God. God stands between the action, the sin or evil and retribution. God stands between with mercy and forgiveness. Retribution leads to an ever-increasing spiral of more retribution, more suffering, more evil. The cycle is continued with ever increasing velocity until it is broken by human action, by human agency for good.

Jesus answered the question of why evil, with the urgent invitation to those around him to repent. That may seem on the surface as a strange response, one even dismissive of the issue. But it is not. To repent is much more than simply to apologize, to say one is sorry or even to be truly sorry. To repent is to turn completely away from the former sin and to faithfully accept God’s grace. We cannot turn ourselves completely around on our own power. Repentance begins with God and the desire of God that everyone turn from sinful ways and live. It is God who stands ready to offer mercy and forgiveness and God who reconciles the sinner. Our part is to be faithfully willing to turn knowing we will be given the grace and strength to do so. It is often said that we must be in the world but not of it and that is true. We must be willing to be engaged with the world, with its problems and yet we must always remember that this is not all there is to our lives. We believe that God is a God of justice as well as mercy and as God’s

hands and feet in the world we must reflect both justice and mercy. Or more aptly, we must reflect a just mercy and at the same time a merciful justice. AS How we do so is the subject of repentance, of turning away from our own power to the power of God.

So, finally we come to the parable of the fig tree. It is risky to assign people to the characters of a parable. In many ways, we find ourselves in all or most of the characters. In this parable, at least one way to look at it is to see in the role of the gardener how God would have us respond to the world of sin, of suffering and of evil. The gardener is open to the possibility of a better future, a future of mercy and justice where the fig tree lives up to its full potential and bears fruit. As we look at the world around us, much is unknown, and many questions remain unanswered. What the future holds is in the hands of many, but ultimately the future is in the hands of God. Our part is to be open to that future, ready to break the cycle of retribution and evil by our actions. Some years ago, the President of Morehouse College, Benjamin Mays expressed our part and our responsibility. "Faith is taking your best step, and leaving the rest to God." The leaving the rest to God is the easy part. It takes courage, sensitivity and trust to take our best step.

Many of us have been listening and reading about events in Ukraine. Much of what we have heard has been from the people who are in the midst of this struggle. One Ukrainian man's statement stays in my mind. He was speaking of the relationship of friendship and cooperation that had existed with the people of Belarus. It had been one he described as brotherhood. Because they had allowed the Russians to use their land to stage the attack on Ukraine, this man said that the friendship was no more and never could be again. "*And never could be again.*" There is another way. An illustration of such another way is the subject of an article sent to me by Teresa di Biase. I want to read it to you.

GRACE HAPPENS

by Teresa Di Biase

As some of you know, I am writing a book about a woman named Margaret Peppers, who served our diocese in the 20's, 30's and early 40's as a Deaconess (a Christian formation and social service ministry which for many years was one of the few options open to women in the Episcopal Church.) During most of this time Deaconess Peppers was assigned to two Japanese congregations, St. Peter's in Seattle and St. Paul's in what was then rural Kent. Both churches were closed during World War II when their priests and congregants were incarcerated in Japanese American internment camps.

Recently I've been in touch with the daughter of the Rev. Joseph Kitagawa, who assisted his brother, the vicar of St. Peter's, for a short while in 1941 before entering seminary in California. She shared an article, entitled "Grace Happens," about her father which appeared in a Midwest church newsletter. It tells a story which still has something to say in this terrible time of war between Russia and the Ukraine.

Before coming to America, Joseph Kitagawa was drafted into the Japanese army, which had invaded China. He was the only Christian in his platoon. One day he encountered a badly wounded Chinese soldier. Thinking Joseph was about to kill him, the man made the sign of the cross. When he saw that, Joseph also made the same sign to show he too was a Christian. Then he knelt and gave the man a drink of water. The Chinese soldier began the Lord's Prayer in Chinese and Joseph prayed with him, also in Chinese. When they reached the words, "Thy will be done," the Chinese soldier died, and Joseph finished the prayer alone.

This and other experiences of the devastation caused by war moved Joseph to save his pay to donate to the Church in China on behalf of suffering civilians, and he was able to

persuade many others in his platoon to do likewise. Discharged from the army after contracting malaria, Joseph came to the United States to finish his theological education. Little did he know that he would be spending most of the next three years ministering with Deaconess Peppers to civilians of Japanese descent (most of whom were American citizens) in the Minidoka concentration camp.

The person who wrote this article was seven years old at the time when Joseph Kitagawa spoke at Trinity Church, Seattle, on Missions Sunday. He never forgot what he heard that day in April 1941, nor did his Episcopal priest father, who preached a year later, also on Missions Sunday. By then we were at war with Japan and Germany and Joseph Kitagawa was imprisoned in Idaho. Father Jessup admonished the congregation that despite being at war, we should not hate our enemies. It's a lesson I'm taking to heart as I pray for Russia, the aggressor nation – which I admit is a harder task for me than praying for the suffering Ukrainians. I'm also praying that now in the Ukraine there may be many similar encounters between warring Christians and that they too will be transformative, leading to peace.

In the words of Michael Curry: “The working out of God’s kingdom is not ours to figure out. Our task is to labor, without having all the answers, to acknowledge the deep mystery of it all. The task of the disciple is to witness and then wait, to take our best step and leave the rest to God.”