

Cycle C Third Sunday of Lent

Reading 1, Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided, “I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned.” When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” God said, “Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your fathers,” he continued, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. But the LORD said, “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Moses said to God, “But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what am I to tell them?” God replied, “I am who am.” Then he added, “This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.” God spoke further to Moses, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. “This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations.”

Reading II, 1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert. These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

Gospel, Lk 13:1-9

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them in reply, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them— do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!” And he told them this parable: “There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.’”

What happens when we read of disasters and watch the devastation of the Ukraine war on television? Or, when we deal with painful tragedies with loved ones and friends? Do we ask: “Where is God?”, or “How can God allow these things to happen?” These are the same questions put to Jesus in today’s Gospel account because the Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate...yes, the same one who later handed over Jesus to be crucified...had murdered a number of Jews in Jerusalem while they worshipped! He mingled their blood with the blood of their temple sacrifices. It was a horrible thing to do, to say the very least. Where was God?

Some say tragedies are God’s way of punishing us for our sins...justified punishment from God inflicted upon us for our sins. If so then why do bad things happen to good people? ...people totally innocent who suffer terrible tragedies? Jesus makes it crystal clear that personal suffering and personal sin are not always connected. To be sure, many sins bring their own punishment with them...but too often the afflicted are not the sinners.

Suffering comes from many causes, some natural, but some suffering is compounded, if not caused by other people’s sins. A good deal of the pain and suffering that we endure in life comes from the sinful attitudes and activities found in other people, and above all people being indifferent. A whole lot of pain comes from those who have a “who cares?” attitude in what they think, say and do.

Pope Francis described Christianity as a religion that by its very nature must act for good, it is not a “religion of saying” made of hypocrisy and vanity. The Holy Father reflected on God’s reality and how fake so many Christians are when they treat the faith as though it were window dressing—devoid of obligation—or an occasion for self-gratification rather than an opportunity for service, especially to our neediest neighbors.

So to be truthful, we are all sinners. If God were to directly link all suffering with our personal sins the world would not be habitable. We simply couldn’t survive; no one would be safe. But as it is, God is not absent from our world. As a matter of fact, He loves us so much that He has sent His only-begotten Son into our world, not to condemn us, but to save us. God gave His son for the life of the world.

But, we need to realize that the world will be saved only to the extent that we receive what God gives us to save our world. God offers and then waits for us to respond. To the extent that we do not respond, either because of refusal to surrender to God, or because of our indifference and “who cares?” attitude...to that extent, the forces of evil and sin will enter into to fill the vacuum...and fill lives with more pain and suffering.

This is why to answer the original question “Where is God in all of this?”, Jesus tells us His parable about the fig tree. The owner had every right to expect the fig tree to produce, not to simply wave it’s pretty leaves in the air. When the master found this fig tree to be yielding nothing, he had a duty to eliminate that tree. But, the response of the gardener in Jesus’ parable was extra tenderness, extraordinary care, and a range of “second chances” to get it to produce. You see, the question is not “Where is God?” the question rather is “Why aren’t we producing?” How are we glorifying God with our lives?

We too, have been put on this earth to produce the results for which God gave us life to produce. God has planted us in the midst of His love and grace. Our families and our friends love us in so many ways, our country provides the freedom to live and participate for good or bad, and our Church gives us awareness of God’s holy presence and His son Jesus Christ. God has offered us His tender, loving care in abundance. So how will we respond?

Will we just wave our pretty leaves in the air or will we feed the world’s hungry, care for those suffering from a tragedy, and help bring order out of the injustices in the world around us?

Did you notice that the parable of the fig tree had no real ending. It just sort of stopped. We don’t know what happened to that fig tree. The same is true for you and me. God has given us life and launched us out into our world with a script to follow along with a director, Jesus Christ, to guide us. But how our individual life stories are eventually written depends entirely on how we respond to what God has given us. And there is no doubt that a merciful God has spared us all, many times over, up to this present moment.

Pope Francis said, “The mercy of the Lord goes out to meet those who dare to argue with Him...to argue about the truth, about the things one does or does not do...[God argues] in order

to correct us. This then, is the great love of the Lord, this tension between saying and doing. To be a Christian means to do...to do the will of God – and on the last day – because all of us will have one – on that day what will the Lord ask us? Will He say: “What have you said about me?” “No,” Pope Francis said, “He will ask us about the things we did.”