

March 23, 2025
Lent III, Year C
Trinity, St. Louis

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Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms 103:1-11

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

In the name of God, the great I AM,
whom we worship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, the Scriptures invite us to confront two big questions – really big questions: Who? and Why? When Moses has his first conversation with God through the burning bush, and God tells Moses there's a job for him in Egypt, Moses balks. But God reassures Moses, "Don't worry, I'll be there with you." Not convinced, Moses pushes back, "but if I'm going to go back to Egypt (where, incidentally, I'm wanted for murder) to bring the Israelites out, why in the world should they listen to me? Who am I that you should send me? And, by the way, just exactly who are you, and what do I tell them your name is?"

Now God had already said, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Shouldn't that be enough? Apparently, not for Moses, and in a striking and unique revelation, God says, "I AM THAT I AM." God mentions nothing about being the creator of the universe, or being the God any particular acreage or nation, or possessing any specific attribute or accomplishment. What God gives to Moses, and to us, is simply a statement of being. I AM. Period.

But the scriptures are packed with stories of how we don't trust that God is who God says God is. In the hurly-burly of daily life, a God who simply IS is simply not enough. We demand more from our God. We want a God who's a little less spiritual, and a lot more action-packed.

We want to watch those gruesome plagues beset the Egyptians. We want to drink water from the rock and taste manna from heaven. We want a God who DOES. And, if we're honest, often as not, we want a God who does **for** us and **against** those we don't much care for; maybe some of **those** Galileans, or **those** unlucky folks killed in a construction accident.

In the part of Luke's Gospel that we hear today, Jesus is surrounded by crowds, and the din of questions about the future grows deafening as Jesus draws nearer to the wilderness of Golgotha. "What will God do?" "What will God do **for** us?" "What will God do **to** us?" Jesus responds with some not-quite rhetorical questions – "do you think that the Galileans Pilate killed were worse sinners?" or "what about the 18 who were

killed when that tower fell on them at Siloam? What about them? What did they do? What did God do?"

Biblical commentators often take this occasion to mention how Jesus tackles the so-called "simplistic conventions" of Bible times – that catastrophic events were God's judgment on the sins of the victims. But these "simplistic conventions" don't belong exclusively to old-timey times. They are part of our everyday experience.

We don't have to look far for examples – like blaming the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on the Queer Community, rather than an outdated and poorly maintained infrastructure, or a worsening climate crisis. Or the knee-jerk response of some that the January 29th collision near Washington's National Airport that killed 67 people was the fault of "DEI hires," rather than an underfunded staffing infrastructure.

The lightning rod for God's wrath always seems to be *them*. God is punishing us because of something they did, or who they are. While it is tempting to label these folks and their ilk as simplistic, if not malevolent, we ought to avoid the wilderness of smugness, for what they do is human beings do.

The gossip mongers in today's Gospel ask a question as old as the human race: why? *Why* did these terrible things happen? Why is there so much pain in the world? Why does a good God allow human suffering?

And since the dawn of time, we've failed to find answers that satisfy us. Still, we can't stop asking the questions. We long for a "Theory of Everything" when bad stuff happens. We reach for platitudes like "there are no coincidences" to help us make sense of the senseless. When you're in the depths of despair, sometimes any explanation is better than nothing at all.

So, what is Jesus' response to, "why"? He tells a story about a fig tree. And, in telling that story, Jesus beckons us away from shallow answers and theories that don't heal. Instead, he invites us into a story which opens up possibilities. This is the way stories work. Stories include us; stories unmake us; stories transform us. *Why did those Galilean Jews die? Why did the tower fall? Okay, sit down, let me tell you about a fig tree...*

Jesus' parable invites us to fall into the story itself, and when we're standing inside it, we see questions coming from every direction at once. I want to highlight three large categories, each containing still more questions.

One. In what ways am I like the absentee landowner, standing apart from where actual life happens? Is my calculus of fairness based on a cost/benefit analysis? Am I prone to look for loss and scarcity in the world – or for potential and possibility? Where in my life – or in the lives of others – have I prematurely called it quits – rendering a judgment that "There's no life here worth cultivating. Cut it down."

Two. In what ways am I like the fig tree? Under nourished? Unable or unwilling to nourish others? In what ways do I feel hopeless or ignored? What sorts of tending might bring me back to life? Am I willing to receive such care? Could I dare to flourish in a world where I have been invisible?

Three. In what ways am I like the gardener? Where in my life am I willing to accept Jesus's invitation to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure? Am I willing to offer grace to this relationship, this cause, this tragedy, this injustice – to sacrifice time, effort, love, and hope into that spindly, fruitless tree – with no guarantee of a fruitful outcome?¹

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When we ask “why,” we are seeking both a cause and someone to blame. WE need a THEM. We need to know that they got what was coming to them so that we feel more righteous, more virtuous, more secure. It's like whistling in the graveyard. It makes us think that we're in control, the control that humanity has been trying to wrest from God since Adam and Eve believed the serpent's big lie.

The story of the fig tree, on the other hand, allows us to begin to see that there is no “us” and “them.” At some point, we are all the landowner, and the tree, and the gardener. *All* of us are beloved, *all* of us are perishing, and *all* of us need the care of a hopeful, patient gardener. The great good news of today is that there is such a gardener – we are loved and tended by the great I AM.

The point is that we should bear fruit and find out what prevents us from doing so. There is no quick remedy. It will take hard work as well as patience ... but just think of the possible harvest yet to come.

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On that day in the wilderness at Horeb, God stepped through boundaries of the natural order into a bush that burned but was not consumed to reveal I AM to Moses. When unable to convince us through the Law and the Prophets of the futility of trying to be God, God again stepped through the natural order to become fully human – to become like us in everything except sin. And, not counting equality with God as something to be grasped at (Phil 2), Jesus stepped into the very wilderness we fear the most – the wilderness of death – and ransomed us forever from its power. Not its existence, but its power.

¹ Debie Thomas. *Journey with Jesus*.

My dear friends in Christ, we have not one iota of control over death as the fate of us all, in spite of our quixotic quest for accomplishment or glory or better cholesterol levels. Like the Collect reminds us, “we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.”

At the same time, there is not a single thing that we can **do** that will make God love us more. Not one single thing. Each Lent we have the opportunity to learn, again, to trust God’s promise and to relax into that love.

As the late Robert Farrar Capon wrote, “in Baptism and Eucharist, in Confession and Absolution, and in all the priestly acts of the Church, we’re celebrating what Jesus has already done, not negotiating with God to get him to do it.”²

So, in these painful days of culture wars, identity trolls, victim shamers, climate catastrophes, insurmountable division, and rising violence, when someone points a finger of blame at you and asks you, “Who do you think you are?” you can answer in full confidence – “I am one who is loved and tended by the great I AM.” Because you are. Amen.

² Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching*, p. 37.