

February 28, 2016 3rd Sunday in Lent

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, Mays line on pg 95; Davidlose.net for Lent 3C, posted 2-22-16

NY Times Opinion Section, Kate Bowler, online 2-13-16, print 2-14-16

Let us pray: May the words

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ, from our Savior of mercy.

Kate Bowler teaches the History of Christianity in North America at Duke Divinity School, in Durham.

Two weeks ago she had a piece in the New York Times entitled, “Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me.”

Bowler begins her article like this: “On a Thursday morning a few months ago, I got a call from my doctor’s assistant telling me that I have Stage 4 cancer.

The stomach cramps I was suffering from were not caused by a faulty gallbladder, but by a massive tumor.

I am 35. I did the things you might expect of someone whose world has suddenly become very small.

I sank to my knees and cried.

I called my husband at our home nearby.

I waited until he arrived so we could wrap our arms around each other and say the things that must be said. *I have loved you forever. I am so grateful for our life together. Please take care of our son.*

Then he walked me from my office to the hospital to start what was left of my new life.”

Besides living with cancer, besides growing up a Mennonite in western Canada, Kate Bowler has spent the last 10 years researching and writing about a popular strain of American theology called the Prosperity Gospel, the idea that “God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith.”

Like I said, it’s popular with big names, Oprah, Joel Osteen, and plenty of mega-churches.

In return for faith, these beliefs try to control the chaos of our world and lives, promising prosperity, health.

They make sense out of it using a pretty sheen for God and God’s incredible mercy, but then they too often fall apart when honest, real-life, suffering comes around—and it always does.

Resting with that new diagnosis, the irony wasn’t lost on Kate Bowler that the community she’d studied for so long would see her illness somehow as punishment for her thoughtful analysis and examination.

Our Gospel reading this morning is... a difficult one, and the temptation to avoid it is high.

This week, as I’ve done my homework, and the Holy Spirit has done hers in me, I can more easily see how the gospel invites us into some of the same tension Kate Bowler describes.

For it’s about suffering and the ageless question of why we suffer, and where God is in our suffering.

Difficult passages are best tackled, so here we go: It begins with two, oh, let's call them, incidents. Really, I suspect they are more like the headline news, the things that people are still talking about, things that have happened, things that raised their concern, and so they bring them to Jesus: The first is highly political, mixed up in the righteous anger directed at the Roman occupier's brutal terror. Jesus, Jesus, remember those Galileans who came to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage and how Pilate had them killed, right there, in the temple, their blood mixing with the blood of the sacrifice? The second headline, the second incident, is more a front-page disaster. We don't know all the details, but it's probable that when the city wall circling around Jerusalem passed by the Pool of Siloam there was a tower in that particular spot in the wall—key word, was. Jesus, Jesus, they cried, remember when that tower collapsed and eighteen people were killed?

Dear friends, they are trying to make sense of this suffering.

How could it happen? Why did it happen?

And, really, Jesus, is this suffering—this suffering of the Galileans who Pilate had killed, the suffering of the folks who died in the collapse—is it because of their sin?

Is it punishment? Is it, essentially, their own fault somehow?

There is something so universal, so honest, in these questions, and 2000 years later, they still hurt.

They are still being asked at bedsides, and the rubble of earthquakes, in humanitarian crises

We could plug in our own losses, our own suffering or the suffering of those around us, or in the news...

Jesus, what about my family when it is falling apart? Or our friend with a new diagnosis?

What about losing a job? Or losing a child? Or a loved one? What about all the pain, death, in the world?

How can we account for that, Jesus?

We human beings are a quirky bunch, and even though blame and fault is the last thing we need, or want, just like kids, it's often the first thing we look for...

If only we can figure out why that bad thing happened, whose fault it might be, it somehow makes this chaotic and uncontrolled world a little more palatable.

At least we think we know what happened, and it at least feels like there is a safety in knowledge.

But hear me out, and hear me clearly: That's not the kind of Jesus we have.

Suffering, loss, disasters, they are not punishment from on high, they are not punishment for our sin.

Jesus says so, rather sharply right here; "Do you think that because they suffered in this way they are worse sinners than all the others?" And then Jesus answers himself, "No, I tell you, no."

What's the take-home today? That's the first one: **Suffering is not God's punishment.**

The next take home comes right on its heels, ringing out like the words of John the Baptist so many chapters before: **Repent, all of you, or else you too will perish.**

So it's true, sin isn't the reason for the bad things, and yet, life is fragile, and seeing others suffer makes this so real, it's fleeting, it's time to act, and now.

And at once our world's systems are full of oppression, brokenness really.

In our thirsty, hungry, yearning times,

When we're separating ourselves from friends and the people we need, and who need us,

When we're timid to take that next step, or act for what is right, or to use the gifts we've given,

Jesus says so clearly, repent, come back, come home, it's time.

Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, the President of Morehouse College through the civil rights years says something to the effect: Faith is taking your best step, and leaving the rest to God.

Take the step, repent, for life is fragile and it's time. That's the second take-home.

All that, but we can't leave this difficult Gospel without noticing the parable.

Remember that fig tree, the one in the middle of the vineyard, the one without any fruit?

Should it be cut down as the owner suggests? Or maybe, as the gardener advocates: just a little more attention, pack on additional manure, another chance?

Is the parable meant to scare us with its imminent judgment?

Honestly, it might have that effect with some congregations, but I suspect it just makes many here all the more skeptical—really, what's the point?

Traditionally this one has been read—for better or worse—as an allegory:

They'd say God is the owner ready to cut down the fig tree, and Jesus is the gardener making a case for a little more time, another chance. But that's a curious take on God.

Everywhere else in Luke, God is full of mercy, searching high and low for that lost coin, scanning the horizon and then running to welcome the prodigal son with arms open wide.

Maybe we're the ones who get impatient with that fig tree's yield.

Maybe we're the ones stuck on what is fair, or conversely, who deserves blame, punishment.

Maybe... maybe God in Christ Jesus is the gardener, full of mercy, inviting us again and again to the cross to be broken open, vulnerable and loving, full of compassion for the world and those closest at hand, because that's the compassion we have first received.

Another year, a little more manure, a second chance.

Here's the gospel promise for Kate Bowler, for us: In our suffering, God is with us, always, with us.

And death and suffering and pain? They don't get the last word.

Christ's mercy gets that word, that's the kind of God we have: Love wins. Love always wins. Amen.