

**March 24, 2019 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent**

**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:10-8**

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

[Matt Skinner on WorkingPreacher.org's Sermon Brainwave podcast #654 for Third Sunday in Lent.

Ideas from Debie Thomas' "Ask a Better Question" in Journey With Jesus posted on 3-17-19.

Rev. Ken Wheeler, speaking on 3-18-19 at ULCH, sponsored by the Minneapolis Area Synod Unite Table.

Quote from Greta Thunberg as found on NPR's "Teen Inspires Youth Demonstrations Across Europe, Demanding Action on Climate Change" posted on 1-25-19. Karoline Lewis in Dear Working Preacher called "Fig Trees and Repentance"

posted on 3-19-19. Wajahat Ali in "The Roots of the Christchurch Massacre" in the online

Opinion for The New York Times on 3-15-19.]

**Let us pray. O God of abounding mercy, meet us on the way, take us where we need to go. Amen.**

**Grace and peace to you, beloved ones of Christ Jesus.**

**Today's strange gospel begins with questions:** nervous, complicated questions,

questions right out of the headlines of Jesus' time: the musing in the market, the whispers at the well.

Questions about suffering, you heard them:

So, Jesus, there was this group of Galilean Jews that was ordered by Pontius Pilate to be killed...

Or, Jesus, about that tower of Siloam that collapsed and crushed 18 people...

Why did these things happen?

How can God allow such suffering?

It's because of their sin, right, Jesus? They deserved it... tell us so!

**Jump ahead two thousand years.**

We like to think of ourselves as more enlightened.

But when it comes to questions of suffering, goodness, we get desperate.

Without even trying, our cultural pop theology swirls and phrases get batted about, things like:

"God's plan", or a God testing us.

None of this fits our theology, but remember what I said about getting desperate?

We wonder quietly, did *they* deserve it?

There's an *us* and *them* that's brewing here: Did you hear it?

A way of keeping a safe distance from the pain.

It sure feels better make up our own story about why that bad thing happened to *them*, lest it could happen to any one of *us*.

**As much as they want to** linger on the questions,

As much as we're tempted to hit refresh as the media spins, in our Gospel, Jesus won't dwell there.

“Do you think they are worse sinners?” Jesus asks rhetorically, and then he answers, “No.” Simply, no.

With nary a pause, Jesus, clear as ever, re-orientes them, turns them,

to *his* agenda for the kingdom of God:

“Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

**With the call to repent, we’re on equal footing, that distance between *us* and *them* disappears.**

Now we, too, are face to face with our own choices, our own fears, our own sin,

really: our communal sin, our societal sin.

We’re face to face with the real suffering that often no one can fully control.

**Let’s talk about repentance, what it doesn’t mean, and what it means:**

Repentance isn’t moral transformation: do better, sin less, act right—whatever that means.

Repentance for Jesus, repentance in Luke’s gospel, as Professor Matt Skinner says, is a “whole new perception of what’s true, what’s real.

It’s about having the possibility of perceiving and recognizing the kingdom around us.”

“Repent,” Jesus says, turn and see what you maybe don’t want to see, what you’d like to avoid.

See who you don’t expect Jesus to love, who you aren’t ready to welcome

And then on the way to the cross, bring along this new, sometimes uncomfortable, angle on the world.

That’s repentance for Jesus. Turn and see it a new way.

That’s our Lenten call.

**Then Jesus tells them that quirky story** about the fig tree and the debate between

the landowner who’s had it, just cut it down, and now,

and the gardener who says give it some extra care, a little manure to fertilize, a chance to bear fruit, just one more year.

**Dear friends in Christ, it’s been a long winter, can I get an Amen?**

Even with the warming, there’s a heaviness that many are feeling and the headlines are heavy, too.

I tell you, too easily I can duck away,

too easily I can get bogged down by the suffering,

too easily I can choose to see the world as *us* and *them*.

There is truth in the quirky gospel this morning.

It’s that truth, that clear call to repent, that possibility of bearing fruit that has converted me once again.

**Just a day after the massacre** in Christchurch, New Zealand, in the Opinion section of the New York Times, Wajahat Ali analyzed the root of this hatred.

Near the end of his piece, he commented how a Muslim friend had messaged wondering how they'd keep their kids safe.

Wajahat Ali wrote, "I didn't have a good answer.

But I know the threat we're facing isn't just individual terrorists.

It's the global ideology of white nationalism and white supremacy.

We have to take it seriously, and call out politicians, academics and media personalities who give it a platform under the guise of exploring both sides, fostering debate or avoiding political correctness."

**On Monday evening**, right here in the sanctuary, Ken Wheeler spoke, really, he preached.

Pastor Wheeler is recently retired.

He spent decades as a Lutheran Pastor and assistant to the bishop in Milwaukee.

He sees the world through the eyes and experience of an African American man.

He, too, knit together the devastation in Christchurch, the shootings at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston and Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and the talk of walls, of us and them.

His message echoed Wajahat Ali's: Most often we frame these killings, this terror, as the act of a lone killer.

Really it's the White Supremacy ideology built into our very society,  
an ideology that fuels talk of border walls and fear of our neighbors,  
an ideology from about which we must repent.

**In late January, in Davos, Switzerland**, at the World Economic Forum, Greta Thunberg, a 16 years old Swedish climate activist, addressed the world with these powerful words:

"Adults keep saying, 'We owe it to the young people to give them hope,'

But I don't want your hope.

I don't want you to be hopeful.

I want you to panic.

I want you to feel the fear I feel everyday.

And then I want you to act...as if your house is on fire. Because it is."

This Sunday we're lifting up the ministry of our congregation's Green Team, and Greta's words ring true.

The Green Team is leading us in becoming a Climate Justice Congregation and they invite us to think about everything from recycling to solar, from our heating systems to water runoff and rain gardens.

Don't jump to hope, Greta said, feel the panic, in a word, repent, turn, see it all differently.

God's kingdom is coming, but to create it, we must get honest, we must repent.

**This morning a wonderful little human named Vanessa will be baptized.**

She'll be welcomed in the big and wide love of our God.

She'll be marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Vanessa's folks are Stephanie and Joe and they are soon to become members.

In baptism we are reminded—each one of us—that we are created in God's good image,

That we're loved and cared for in this life and into eternity, Amen.

But, if we listen closely to that baptismal service, in it we all, each time, also reject sin, we renounce evil and all the forces that work against God.

We need to do more of that, it's Jesus' call to repent.

Greta Thunberg knows that: when we could be lulled by a false hope, we're called to feel the crisis for our planet, for Greta and Vanessa, and the future.

And we're called to act, and act big; we're called to nothing less than repentance.

**As I close today, I borrow some of Karoline Lewis' concluding words this week in Working Preacher:**

Dear ones, let us repent of our silence.

Let us repent of how we "make excuses for horrific acts...instead of getting to the real issues that perpetuate environments in which events like the shooting in Christchurch can keep on happening."

Let us repent of how we "continue to ignore the truth and refuse to connect the dots."

Let us repent of "our complicity and complacency, for our explanations and enabling."

**Jesus is on to us. He knows us, and well.**

"We will always find a way to justify ourselves before seeking justice for others.

We will always find a way to protect power over people.

And we will always find a way to turn the spotlight on others before taking a good, hard look at ourselves."

**Dear ones, God loves you, repent, repent and live.**

As Karoline Lewis writes, "The world cannot afford our barrenness any longer."

Amen.