

Trinity Janesville
3rd Sunday in Lent
March 2007

I have two sons. They are now in their late 20's. Today's readings reminded me of something that happened when my youngest son, Ryan, was 4 years old. Ryan is wonderful now, but at 4 years old he was really wonderful! A delightful and inquisitive human being. Like most 4 year olds, he played hard; ending up with his share of bumps, scrapes and bruises.

One night, after a bedtime story and saying our prayers, he looked particularly troubled. When I asked him what was wrong, tears welled up in his eyes and he told me that he thought God was mad at him and had been punishing him for lying to his Dad. He explained that he'd had a particularly bad week; falling off his scooter and scraping his knee, badly bruising his elbow when he fell off the slide, loosing his favorite rock, and, just that night, banging his head, hard, on the headboard of his bed.

"It must be punishment," he sobbed, "because I lied to Dad last week."

This is the same line of thinking often associated with our readings this morning. The message of these two linked passages -- Jesus' comment on arbitrary deaths and the parable of the unproductive fig tree -- is often proclaimed as a message of: "Repent or Perish."

How often have you heard others, or even felt this way yourself; in the midst of tragedy, people often try to reconcile the bad things that happen, through the image of a punishing God; a God who punishes us because we are lacking or unworthy in some way. If there is something wrong with us or someone we love, there must be a reason.

I get the "repentance" part that is clearly part of the message in these readings. But I believe there is *more* to the message of these passages.

"Repent or perish" doesn't totally work for me as a summary of these readings, primarily because those in power in these stories are not like God; they pay no regard to who is penitent or unrepentant. Pilate slaughters Galilean pilgrims who had committed no crime.

The truth is that terrible things happen, and we are not always to blame. So the "repent or perish!" idea doesn't work for me as the overriding theme of this Sunday's gospel because being penitent doesn't seem to be any guarantee of *not* perishing. Even if we're pious and hard-working and we play by the rules, there's no guarantee of a happy ending in this world.

And then there's the parable of the fig tree. The gardener, who knows how to grow figs, counsels the landlord to be patient. In this Sunday's gospel, the landowner has waited three years for fruit that didn't appear, and yet the gardener is still willing and able to care for the tree and to intercede with the landowner to save it.

Threatening people with the concept of being chopped down if they are not performing doesn't play well with many people and leads to an image of a punishing God.

I rather think that the message Jesus may be offering here is the idea of investing more time, nurturing more intensely and intentionally. It fits exactly with other images of Jesus as a shepherd or a gardener; the imagery of shepherding and sowing. In the context of nurturing or being nurtured we can grasp that in the 'great eternal plan' we are all living in borrowed time.

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Time doesn't belong to us, nor should it be allowed to master us. It's there for us to serve - in God's ongoing love & compassion for us all, fruitful or not.

I like the suggestion that it's not the owner, but *the gardener* who represents God in this parable! God is as good at tending the garden of our souls and nurturing the gifts he has given us, as *he* is at shepherd-ing us as his sheep and sowing "good seed" in the form of each one of us. It all takes place in God's eternal "extra" year of grace granted to us. Not bearing fruit is, in this parable, no guarantee of destruction by the end of the story. Mercy is still possible.

A fruitful life, regardless of our fortunes, occurs when we're embracing God's mercy in the present. Barbara Brown Taylor offers the idea that, through these stories, Jesus is honoring the vulnerability that fear opens up in us. It is not a bad thing for us to feel the full fragility of our lives. It is in those moments of vulnerability that we are forced to turn towards the light, the light of God's love and grace.

In the Old Testament reading, Moses is hiding out in Midian, after fleeing Egypt because he was wanted for murder. While he is tending his father-in-law's sheep near Mt Horeb, his attention is caught by a burning bush. This fire - this bright light that burned but did not consume the bush - was the divine manifestation of God's presence. Through this Presence of light, God assures Moses, and thereby assures us, that he will always be with us. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, it is in moments of vulnerability, when, for no apparent reason, walls are crashing down on us, that we are forced to turn towards the light, the light of God's love and grace.

Our theme at Camp Webb this year is "Let light shine through the darkness and let the light of Christ shine in your heart." We will use this theme in hundreds of different ways to illustrate for the campers that God is with us always and that we carry the light of God's love and grace with us at all times.

In this community of faith, we will intentionally nurture the fruits of love, justice, and compassion. The campers and staff will experience new or increased understanding of the power of the God's Light, shining in each one of us that will carry us, and others, through times of vulnerability and fear. Each week we will illustrate in a number of ways how each of us must carry this light of God's love and mercy into the world.

Every summer we choose a song to be "the" song for the season. This year's is by a Christian artist, Chris Rice. I'd like to share some of the verses with you.

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Go Light Your World

Chris Rice

There is a candle in every soul
Some brightly burning, some dark and cold
There is a Spirit who brings a fire
Ignites a candle and makes His home

So carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the helpless, confused and torn
Hold out your candle for all to see it
Take your candle, and go light your world

Cause We are a family whose hearts are blazing
So let's raise our candles and light up the sky
Praying to our Father, in the name of Jesus
Make us a beacon in darkest times

So Carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the helpless, deceived and poor
Hold out your candle for all to see it
Take your candle, and go light your world

During this season of Lent as we are reminded of our vulnerability may we be increasingly drawn towards the light, the light of God's love and grace.
There's an invitation in today's readings. The invitation to us here springs from grace, from an awareness of how precious this moment is, this life, this mercy, this chance.

Turn towards the light.

Carry your light.

Accept God's words of hope. Grow and flourish like a fig tree in bloom, doing God's work in the world.

Carlynn Highbie, Director
Camp Webb