

Who's To Blame?

The week started with a visit to a small, cold, back room at the mortuary.

There, on a table, covered with a blanket, lay the remains of Bianca.

A graduate of Boston University, she spoke three languages and earned a living as a model — her mom and dad and her only friend were there as we prayed before her body was sent into the fire for cremation.

Dead of an infection, brought on by alcoholism, at the age of 34.

Who's to blame?

Pilate has his guards slaughter men from Galilee who are at the temple offering their sacrifice....so their blood mixes with the blood of the lambs.

Is the evil the Romans fault?

Is something wrong with the men who are offering their sacrifice that such a horror should happen in the midst of religious worship?

Who's to blame?

In Lisbon, Portugal, on All Saints Day in the year 1755, a massive earthquake struck killing as many as 100 thousand people, including thousands who were at prayer in churches all around the city that day.

Who's to blame?

And last Wednesday, Franklin Graham, the son of world famous evangelist Billy Graham was in town, encouraging the hundreds who showed up to elect Bible believing evangelical Christians to every level of government in the name of almighty God, because, he went on to say, this nation is collapsing into moral chaos.

Who's to blame?

It always amazes me how our weekly readings go right to the heart of our every day life.

People then and people now are dying to have clear answers to life's mysteries.

Whether that mystery is when and how the world will end or whether it is the mystery of human evil, like Pilate's attack on the Galilean worshippers, or right wing evangelicals co-opting the word of God to fit a narrow, nationalistic, white-power form of civil religion — we gather around and ask: "why?" "why?" "why?"

The crowds are chanting that question at Jesus today, but Jesus isn't biting.

When Isa was diagnosed with terminal colon cancer, our friend and priest, Fr. Charlie Hopkins, brought her a book entitled: "How to Live and Die Gracefully."

Isa threw the book at Charlie so hard it nearly took his head off.

A few years ago, Fr. Charlie was dying from lung disease.

One of his sons brought him a book entitled: "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?"

Charlie threw that book so hard at his son that it nearly took his head off!

When you're in that situation, what you know to be true is that there's no book, no words of advice, no easy explanation, for what's coming.

Something more is needed, and paradoxically, something less as well.

When the crowd demands that Jesus answer the question about why bad stuff happens, and who's to blame for it, Jesus doesn't offer a book or a slogan; instead, he turns their focus from looking out there to looking inside.

There's an old saying: "If you're pointing your finger at someone, you've got three more fingers pointing back at yourself."

Look inside, Jesus says to them, and ask what is it in you that needs to change; to be reformed; to be transformed; and in that looking, remember that repentance isn't something we do to placate an angry God; repentance is that turning around so that we see again that life is a precious gift, with no guarantees attached, but still a precious gift full of possibility.

It is the way of mercy and forgiveness and humility and giving the other gal the benefit of the doubt.

It is the way of leaving to God alone the judgments of who is right and what is wrong; advice Jesus gives over and over as he counsels to let the weeds and wheat grow together; let the good fish and bad mix together, that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, and that God is kind to the ungrateful.

Repentance is a call to surrender to the difficult truth that God's ways are not our ways, to let go, to live our lives in the quiet confidence that no matter the circumstances, God is, and God is faithful...

And so we have the story of the fig tree and gardener.

Some hear this story and try to make it neat and tidy: God is the owner, Jesus is the gardener and we are the tree.

Shape up or get cut down!

But perhaps like so much of what Jesus teaches, the true meaning is deeper.

“Why tell a story of an unfruitful fig tree when calamity has just struck?”

There’s no moral advice in this story.

Instead, it’s one more time that Jesus confronts our need for answers with God’s invitation to simply trust.

Manure, smelly and disgusting, something meant to be hauled away, just might become the very source of new fruit — and as the story unfolds, we don’t know if it will work; and yet, in that very uncertainty — is our hope.” David Lose, paraphrased.

When we look at the word used by the gardener as he asks the owner for more time for the tree, the word he uses is *Áphes*, which may be translated as – “Let it be.”

It’s the same word Jesus utters on the cross, not knowing whether the sacrifice of his life has made any difference at all, not having the answer to his heart wrenching cry: “My God my God why have you forsaken me?”; yet in the face of his uncertainty he utters:

“Áphes,” “let it be” – “forgive them.”

The crowd surrounding Jesus this morning feels vulnerable because of Pilate’s slaughter, because of the 18 dead to a collapsing tower.

The crowd gathered to hear Franklin Graham feels vulnerable to cultural changes happening beneath their feet, where those who were once outsiders now have a place at the table, where sure and certain answers to important questions don’t seem so sure or certain anymore.

Isa and Charlie felt vulnerable when they threw those books at their well-intentioned givers and we too feel vulnerable in the face of life’s uncertainties and disasters.

The barren fig tree stands in its ground, vulnerable to the judgment, but also to the mercy, of the gardener.

And yet:

“It’s not a bad thing to feel the full fragility of your life.

It’s not a bad thing for you to count your breaths in the dark -- not if it makes you turn toward the light.

It's why that torn place my fear opens up inside of me -- it is a holy place.

When you are in that holy place, look around.

Pay attention to what you feel.

It may hurt to stay there and it may hurt to see, but it's not the kind of hurt that will kill you.

It's the kind that gives you life.

Depending on what you want from God, this may not sound like good news at all . . . but for those who know that we cannot make life safe nor God tame, it is the best news of all."
Barbara Taylor Brown, paraphrased.

Today's gospel is an invitation to live in the tension, to live in the mystery.

We don't know the fate of the fig tree; nor do we know our own fate, or the fate of those we love -- yet living in the mystery is as old as our faith.

So perhaps what we might take from our travels with Jesus today, in our quest to know the answers to things that are unknowable, perhaps we can step back from our constant longing for information, and seek instead the transformation that comes with following this strange yet wonderful preacher from Galilee.

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