Sermon on Lent 3 2019
(Luke 13:1-9)

It almost seems we can’t help it; I’m not sure why! Is it some deep-seated drive that has some evolutionary explanation; is it part of what Christians call “the fall,” a reality to which all of us are prone because we all sin?

Whatever the case may be; it seems that even if we manage to hold our tongue we can’t quite stop our thoughts from blaming the victim.

It happens to me all the time: a person lying on the front stoop of the St. Thomas hall, and even before I can stop myself there’s the thought, “I wonder why they’re here?” No pun intended, but I don’t blame myself for this because the path towards a more helpful and empathic encounter is difficult.

To get to the point of not blaming the victim is, from the perspective of the cross: one of the main points of the entire Christian journey: God’s ultimate solidarity with all victims

this is where, if we’ve signed up to follow this Rabbi, this would-be “saviour of the world,” we are all going: learning to live in non-blaming, forgiving solidarity with all victims!

But there’s not just blaming the victim, there’s the rush to explain, to give a reason to those we love when they suffer. We explain away difficulties and disasters as mere precursors for greater blessings.

Perhaps you’ve had the experience, possibly in the midst of a brutal chemo treatment, some well-meaning family member, parishioner or priest has said, “hey, there is some reason, some hidden blessing for you in all this!”

You grin, but grimace inwardly, and wonder, “really? It just feels like chaos to me!” The well-meaning, because it is well-meaning, explanation makes us feel less understood and more alone, more isolated in our pain.

In truth, I think many of us just find the pain of others too difficult to hold; we’ve got too much anxiety of our own to deal with, so we try to get past each other’s pain with an explanation.

That, or in desperation, we try to fix the problem. Those who use wheelchairs tell stories of strangers walking up to them, and without knowing one smidgeon about them, say with confidence, “if you just had faith and prayed, you’d get up out of your wheelchair.”

Really it’s just another way of seeking a reason for this suffering: lack of prayer. The use of reason, the search for explanations is part of what makes us human and it isn’t a bad thing, of course. Reason is one of God’s greatest gifts and allows us to experience the universe in its complexity and beauty.

But there are limits, and reason and suffering, reason and victimhood do not make good partners.

Maybe that’s because when we come face to face with suffering in the stranger or in friend, we come face-to-face with our own coming suffering and death.

Our explanations are our attempt to build walls around ourselves to keep out what none of us can ultimately keep out.

In our gospel reading today we find Jesus at one of his philosophical highpoints, and just so it’s one of those points in his teaching that has the greatest resonance for our discipleship and that most Lenten of all words: repentance!

Jesus, as he always does is never satisfied with stock explanations as to why something has happened. What he always seeks to do is turn the events, the ideas, the conundrums he’s presented with into an opportunity for his first followers and us to open our minds, to change our minds!

Death, Jesus says, does not operate in our lives based on logic, it’s not purposeful; but it is inevitable.

In one case empire kills; in another a structure falls; both are the results of human actions, so in that sense there is a reason, both are the result of sin and/or human finitude or unforeseen defects.

But ultimately there is no direct cause and effect as to why those things happened to just those people, just as there is no reason why some people experience one misfortune and others another.

Death pursues us all, whether we are victims of an oppressor, or whether we just happened to be in the wrong place when that drunk driver rammed into us!

Both human evil and chance are part of the infinitely complex algorithm of suffering and death; it is misguided to look for some ordering principle in relationship to them.

But, the good news, Jesus says, is that death can be faced; though arbitrary, though it comes for us all, it can yet be a creative and powerful force for good in our lives; it can help us “change our minds” about what is worthwhile, what is important and how we might yet live.

From this perspective, which is, no mere word play, but a claim about who and what God is and is like, God’s grace is more powerful than death, God’s will to redeem, to restore our fortunes, to set right, to make whole is more powerful, more defining than death.

The call to repent then, is not simply about being “sorry for our sins,” but the change of mind that opens us up to the capacity to not hide from anything, not hide from our own fears and anxieties about death, not hide behind explanations and “reasons” for the suffering and death of others.

In short, this amazing text is about defeating the sense of fate and failure, the sense of blame and existential guilt that we suffer under and from; God is redeeming us and making us whole, if we only but let God influence our minds and actions.

Jesus, as he does, tells a story, a man plants a fig tree but grows frustrated when the fig tree does not bloom or produce figs. He’s ready to uproot it and throw it out but his gardener intercedes, asking for one more year, one more year in which he can fertilize and water it; actually the story is more graphic, one more year of manure! It’s the smelly stuff, the stuff we’d rather avoid that spurs growth in us!

Luke doesn’t tell us what happens which is brilliant; I’m betting Jesus didn’t tell his original audience either! What we do get is the hopeful posture of someone who is open to change, open to growth, even though the immediate circumstances don’t seem that hopeful.

Perfect! A place for God! Some of us are like the man who had the tree planted. We think there is no life in what we’ve planned, in our partner, in our marriage, in my spirituality, in church.

We have the opportunity to repent. While not ignoring what we see, we are encouraged to open our minds to the life and hope that is present in the chaos, the possibility that God’s grace might yet open to us through this difficulty.

Some of us are like the fig tree, dismissed, explained away. We know that others talk about us, “why can’t he get his act together?” Know this, God is not finished with you! The Gardener sees possibility where others see impossibility.

Recently I was reading about a man who took a seed, planted it in a large globular flask, put in a couple of pints of soil and a pint of water and sealed it with a stopper that allows no moisture and oxygen into the flask; that was in 1960, almost 60 years ago

The plant is still growing, all it needs is sunlight; through the magic of photosynthesis it produces everything it needs; falling leaves and the microbes in the soil produces fresh soil, condensation produces the “rain,” etc. it takes in CO2 and emits Oxygen.

It would appear that it doesn’t take much for plants to grow. Jesus’ use of a tree as a metaphor is powerful because sometimes we think we have to change a lot in order to grow but I’m here to tell you that the grace of God in you is the only ecosystem you need to keep growing, to keep changing your mind, to keep expanding your openness to love and grace

Through the grace of God’s self-giving to us in the Holy Eucharist, you have everything you need to grow!

This Lent, let’s take our penchant to explain, to make sense, to fix suffering and allow it to simply be the chaos, random, thing it is; like death, coming for all of us.

But at the same time let’s reckon again with God’s amazing grace which is stronger than death. Maybe then we will begin to shift our acting towards compassion and empathy; to sit alongside our family member or parishioner who is suffering, to join them in the sheer pain of grief; to love them as we would hope to be loved when we too will suffer.

If we do, we will be giving the them the only explanation they need, the logic of grace; then, you can be sure that nothing will be cut down that will not flourish in the end!