

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year C: Exodus 3:1–15; Psalm 103:1–11; 1 Corinthians 10:1–13; Luke 13:1–9

Occasionally a story that carries a memory of Jesus' ordinary humanity finds its way into our gospel narratives. Today's lesson begins with people bringing news to Jesus—in other words, telling Jesus something he doesn't already know. Pilate has killed some Galileans while they were sacrificing animals, that is, while worshiping God in the temple. It's not gentle news, and neither is the news Jesus already knows of the tower in Jerusalem that collapsed and killed. Sin and evil, and also unexpected tragedy are part of the reality of human life.

Over the years, Luke's Jesus has often seemed to me to be as harsh as Matthew's Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus' words to Peter about the need to forgive a sinner seventy times seven times is followed by the story of a debtor who makes one mistake and was not allowed even a second chance.¹ In Luke, men and women need to repent, to turn to God, to let God into their lives,

¹ Matthew 18:21–34.

before they die, or they will not enter the kingdom, of God. They will find themselves in a place of torment.²

Working with today's gospel lesson, I think I may have found a greater understanding of the compassion and solicitousness Luke's Jesus—the compassion that we find in Luke as Jesus is dying on the cross for the wrongdoer who is dying alongside of him.³ I'm not sure I can speak any more about a “mean Jesus” in Luke.

Today we're in the middle of Luke's gospel. Jesus and his disciples are well on their way to Jerusalem. They have stopped, and Jesus is teaching the crowds. Just before today's lesson, he has said to them, “When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’ . . . You have learned how to interpret the look of earth and sky. How is it that you have not learned to interpret the season that is here?”⁴ The season, of course, is the dominion of God: Jesus.

² Luke 13:22–30; 14:16–24; 16:19–31.

³ Luke 23:43.

⁴ Luke 12:54–56. Translation: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 28A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 998.

So, on hearing the news of the evil that Pilate ordered, Jesus challenges the crowds about their future, not their past.⁵ He follows this up with the story of the fig tree that is given more time to be fruitful. It's the message John the Baptist preached, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."⁶

Who is this Jesus? He is the loving God who seeks us out. A God who doesn't take us from the world where sin, great evil, and tragedy overshadow too often too many lives. But for Luke, those who turn to Jesus face life, death, and judgment with confidence in their faith in God's loving purposes for all people. In Luke, Adam and Jesus are both sons of God.⁷

I still haven't figured out why last Sunday our gospel lesson was from the latter part of chapter thirteen in Luke, and today's gospel lesson is from the beginning.⁸ That lesson began with this question for Jesus,

⁵ François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 268.

⁶ Luke 3:9.

⁷ Luke 1:35; 3:38.

⁸ After Mass today, Br. Thomas Bushnell BSG told me he had looked it up and knew why: we had to find a different lesson for the Second Sunday in Lent because we use

“ ‘Lord, will those who are saved be few?’ And he said to them, ‘Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.’ ”⁹

The late Franklin Young, an Episcopal priest and New Testament scholar, points out that Luke’s Jesus calls for not only a renunciation of our sins, but also he has called us to a new way of life: “It is the way of love, service, and suffering to which Jesus calls followers through faith and repentance. And the resurrected Lord is the witness to and promise of the ultimate victory of this way in and over violence and death of the world.”¹⁰

Among the most important reasons I became an Episcopalian was the intellectual honesty I found in the preaching of the clergy at Saint Paul’s Memorial Church when I was in college in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the preaching of the rector and assisting priests at the Church of St. Paul and the Redeemer when I was in graduate school in Chicago. But perhaps more important was a sense that the Anglican

the accounts of the Transfiguration on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. The Roman Catholic Lectionary, on which all of the three-year lectionaries are based, uses these lessons on the Second Sunday in Lent.

⁹ Luke 13:23–24.

¹⁰ Franklin W. Young, “Luke 13:1–9,” *Interpretation* 31 (January 1977), 59–63.

tradition expected people to be responsible for themselves. I wish this question and answer from the 1928 Prayer Book's "Office of Instruction" was still in our Prayer Book:

*Question. What is your bounden duty as a member of the Church? Answer. My bounden duty is to follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his Church; and to work and pray and give for the spread of his kingdom.*¹¹

Saint Mary's is open every day of the year as a witness to our common vocation to gather weekly as a community of believers and daily in some way to work, pray, and give for the spread of Christ's kingdom.

At the beginning of Morning Prayer, almost always we begin with the first seven verses of Psalm 95, called the "Venite" for the first word of the Latin text. It begins "Come, let us sing to Lord" and ends "For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice!"¹² We don't use the final four

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 291.

¹² *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 82.

verses, recommended for Fridays in Lent because the way the book is laid out, it's just not practical for our congregation. We pray them all on the nineteenth day of the month in the course of the Prayer Book's 30-day psalm cycle. These are the final verses, and they are good to know:

8 *Harden not your hearts, as your forebears did in the wilderness, *
at Meribah, and on that day at Massah,
when they tempted me.*

9 *They put me to the test, *
though they had seen my works.*

10 *Forty years long I detested that generation and said, *
“This people are wayward in their hearts;
they do not know my ways.”*

11 *So I swore in my wrath, *
“They shall not enter into my rest.”¹³*

¹³ Ibid., 725.

I close with the words we say before and after the Venite during Lent: “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy: Come, let us adore him.”¹⁴

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 81.