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Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9
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I remember one day from my childhood in particular when I was about eight years old. I was playing in the city park that was behind our house with my little sister, Ruth. Only four years apart, we were and still are the best of friends. Back then, we spent most of our waking hours together giggling and telling secrets as only little girls can. We were having a make-believe party at one of the picnic tables, serving tea and entertaining our imaginary guests, when a group of children approached us. They stared quietly for a few minutes and then the oldest boy pointed at Ruth and asked, "What's wrong with her?" I puffed up my chest and announced the truth, "There's nothing wrong with her," to which the others started laughing. Then one of the girls stepped forward and demanded to know, "What happened to her?" At that point, with tears threatening to fall, my options as I saw them were to flatten each and every one of them with my fists or get us both out of there. Being a runt of about 60 pounds, I wisely chose to head for home, but not before "accidentally" ramming Ruth's wheelchair into a few shins as we made our exit from the park. Ruth and I have never spoken of that day when our idyllic little world changed forever. With years of hindsight, I know now that they were just curious children, questioning what they didn't understand, trying to make sense of a little girl in a wheelchair with braces on her legs and arms that seemed to be stuck at odd angles. But even at their young age they wanted an explanation for the unexplainable. They thought there must be a logical sequence of cause and effect that would provide them with reasons for all the blessings and misfortunes they would one day encounter in the world.

Jesus anticipated those questions in today's Gospel reading. Two tragedies had taken place in Jerusalem: One, the slaughter of several Jews in the Temple by Pilate, and the other, a tower in Siloam falling and killing 18 people who just happened to be standing there. The common Jewish understanding at that time was that sin caused suffering and therefore suffering must be the result of someone's sin. Jesus merely poses the questions that had to be on everyone's mind when he asks, "Do you think these people were worse sinners than everyone else because of the suffering they endured? Do you believe that the calamities and disasters that happen to people and even whole countries are somehow payback for their evil ways?" Remember not too long before this another crowd had observed a young man blind from birth and asked Jesus, "Which of his parents sinned?" It's tempting isn't it – to try to find a reason or an explanation for all the deeply mysterious tragedies that come into our world? There has to be a reason doesn't there when a young girl get abducted off the street in California and brutally killed, when two little babies die in a house fire all alone, when cancer strikes a mother of three. Often we need a place to put our anger and grief, and yes, the blame for the things that just don't make sense. Sometimes that place is God, sometimes it's an anonymous stranger, and sometimes we even point an accusing finger at ourselves. Because, you see, we think that if we can identify the culprit, the bad guy, then we just might have a chance at controlling what appears to be the arbitrary chaos of our lives.

But Jesus says no. It's not that simple. There is no easy equation where bad things happen only to bad people. You can't always find a culpable party. You don't get to put 2

and 2 together and come up with 4, which leaves most of us thinking that this God of ours isn't making much sense. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord." But that doesn't mean Jesus lets the questioners off the hook. He won't be distracted by their eagerness to speculate on their neighbor's sins or the reasoning of God. "No" he says, "those who suffer are not worse sinners because of what happens to them," but he turns it back around to them, "unless YOU repent you will all likewise perish." Talk about tough love. The Old Testament word for it is judgment. Our softer and more palatable 21st Century expression is accountability. But whatever you call it, Jesus warns them that there are consequences for denying our own sin. He's not saying that if you're unrepentant a tower will fall on you or an earthquake may hasten your untimely death. But he is telling them to pay attention. "Unless you turn from your sin and follow after me you will have no part in me." Isn't that what it means to perish, to be cut off from God forever? But God offers a word of hope in our Isaiah passage this morning: "Incline your ear, and come to me; Listen, that your soul may live." Listen, that your soul may live. What is it we need to hear? Time is finite, Jesus says. Allow these senseless deaths to be a wake up call for you.

And so he tells them the story of the barren fig tree. A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard. For three years he invested his time, money and energy into this tree. And each year he came to the tree only to find it empty of fruit. Where is the fruit – the harvest that he should be reaping? It's not that the tree is unhealthy. It's just not doing what it was created to do, bear fruit. So the owner says, "Cut it down, why should it use up valuable ground?" The story would have made a lot of sense to the people who were listening that day. Hey, it makes sense to us! An investment was made, an appropriate length of time has passed and yet the investor has not received a profitable return. Simple causal and predictable results – the tree must be cut down. End of story. But is it? If we listen we hear the merciful voice of the gardener who steps in and says, "Give me one more year. I'll lavish all my attention on this tree. I'll nurture it and feed it and if at the end of that year, it still doesn't bear fruit, then you can cut it down." "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees," warns John the Baptist at the beginning of this Gospel, "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." But Jesus tells us, "There are no throwaways in the kingdom of God, no one is beyond God's reach." Jesus says, "I will not give up on the barren and the broken. What may seem of no use in this world will grow and flourish in the care of my love. Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but to call sinners to repentance."

Three weeks ago, you and I stood right there and received the mark of repentance on our foreheads in ashes. And someone said over you, "Repent and believe the Gospel." So where are you in your Lenten journey right now? Have you made a commitment to some spiritual discipline or are you just going through the motions of your faith, taking up space? Are you using your God-given gifts to serve others or do you find yourself withholding the fruits of love and kindness from those around you? Have you taken all your worries and anxieties and placed them in God's hands or do you live in fear of what might happen next? Isaiah says, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near." During Lent we are called to repentance – *metanoia* - a complete turning around of our heart, mind and soul. A turning away from death and sin toward

life and wholeness; offered to us by the one who died so that we might live and live abundantly.

A childlike view of the world says nothing bad will ever happen if I carry my lucky rabbit's foot and say my bedtime prayers. But you and I are no longer children and we know that this world can be a place of inexplicable suffering and pain. That our hearts can be broken and our lives changed forever by one phone call, one bad decision, one reckless act of violence. What we need is not a childlike view of the world or God, but a childlike faith. A faith that recognizes our all too human need to have control and learns to let it go. A faith that realizes even when the world doesn't make sense, God is still here, working and healing and restoring peace to God's children. A faith that admits our need to repent, to turn away from the darkness in our lives toward the light of Christ.

I just finished reading a book called "The Rope Walk" by Carrie Brown. It's a beautifully written coming-of-age story about a young girl named Alice. It begins on the sun-drenched morning of her 10th birthday when life seems simple, gracious and benevolent. But as the days pass and the events of a turbulent year unfold, she begins to sense that there is more to this life than we can ever comprehend. The author writes, "The world of her childhood, with its endless days and deep, certain sleep and quicksilver possibilities, had been abraded, roughened, its perimeter made vulnerable by the apprehension of dangers – death and poverty and war and sickness – all arriving from the real world... Somewhere in what now felt like her distant past there had been a beautiful May morning when she had turned 10 years old, and for the first time happiness and sadness, beauty and cruelty had begun to join themselves together inside her, entwining themselves inextricably like the tendrils of a vine up the trunk of a tree. But now in her love of the world, there was less fear and more longing. The shock of knowing exactly how things could be lost had started to wear off so that instead, coming hand over hand through starlight and moonlight and lamplight, she thought not of the future, of what would happen next, nor of the past, but only, for a moment, of the shining present." That is, after all, where God calls us to live. Here in the fullness of this time in this place.

I don't know what has been tugging at your heart lately or what stirrings the Spirit may have awakened in you. Maybe you've been thinking and talking to friends and praying about what God has planned for your next step, but fear of the "what ifs" has made you hesitant. What I do know is that Jesus tells us we have a limited number of days to bear fruit – there is a sense of urgency in his message. Maybe this is the time, this is the Lent to step out in faith and trust that the Lord will provide. To believe that despite all the evil and suffering we see in the world, that God is good. That's what I'd want to tell those children.

If I could go back in time to that afternoon in the park when the questions of those children shattered the innocent bubble that surrounded Ruth and me, I would want to say to them, "Don't be afraid of what you don't understand. It's OK not to have all the answers. Reach out in spite of your fear and take the risk of loving what you can't begin to comprehend or control. Claim the love of God for yourself and realize that no matter who we are, we all need the grace and mercy that God so freely offers. Receive that gift and then go forth bearing fruit, giving yourself in love to the world. Amen.