

Sermon for Lent 3  
March 20, 2022  
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church  
Los Alamos, New Mexico  
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney

Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 63:1-8  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13  
Luke 13:1-9

Welcome to the middle of Lent. We're halfway there. We've all done those things which we ought not to have done, and We have not done those things that we ought to do.

The Epistle reminds me of a reality show I once watched, once upon a time – Survivor. It remains the longest running reality show, but I stopped watching a long time ago. But I remember one episode when a member of one of the two teams spouted his philosophy of life as “Love Many, Trust Few, Harm None.” Nice if that were true.

Paul seems to be expressing his opinion about who ought to be voted off the island, and out of the church of Corinth. It's another of those low points of Lent: to be reminded, yet again, how we all fall short. As is oft said: “It is Lent, we're supposed to feel bad about ourselves?” We're only half way and I've already eaten chocolate. I know I said I'd quit swearing, but those drivers...” “The headaches were too much, I had to go back on coffee.”

No, that's not what I'm talking about. The “yeah, but I...s” of our lives don't get us struck down by divine lightning, or killed by snakes. Paul in his writing to the Corinthians is pulling out the heavy artillery and accusing them of repeating the sins of the past by getting the word of the Good News of Jesus Christ ALL WRONG.

Paul reiterates the sins of their ancestors, and points out the weakness that came upon them as they wandered about in the wilderness for forty years. They were an ornery bunch – “a stiff-necked, rebellious people” – but it was the Golden Calf thing that bugged God the most.

You can almost hear the Corinthians saying: “yeah, but that was then and this is now.” They’re long dead. No one in my family did any such thing. No way. No how. Don’t blame us for what our people did before I was even born.

That may be True, and the saving grace of Paul’s letter is that the vast majority of the church in Corinth were not the ones who were in error, but the few. So these recriminations accuse not all the church, but those who getting it wrong.

We can quibble about Paul’s management style. Personally I believe the blanket approach makes everyone feel guilty, except the ones who need to feel guilty.

However, Paul is wise in the totality of the letter because the letter focuses more about how we live together in Christ than mending the errors of our ways.

That’s the problem I see with competition TV shows like Survivor, and the reason I stopped watching. The show, and reality shows like it, do not teach cooperation; they the art of deception and betrayal – even betrayal of those on whose team you serve.

It’s not about Loving many, it’s about loving no one but oneself. It’s not about trusting few, it’s about trusting no one. It’s not about harming none, it’s about harming everyone in turn. Survivor does not teach us how to live together, it teaches us how to decide who we can live without.

Paul’s lesson here is that we must learn from the past, so as not repeat the sins of the past in the present. We must love our neighbors. And we must trust God. As Julian of Norwich is quoted as saying: “all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well'...”

Or as I saw written on a friend’s refrigerator, which was quoted in “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel”:

Everything will be OK in the end; If everything isn’t OK, it’s not the end.”

Trust in God. It's stamped on the Penny: "In God we Trust" or as Jean Shepherd, a writer from my home state titled one of his books: "In God we Trust: all others pay cash."

But We don't: trust God, that is, and most of us don't pay cash. What we do is what the Corinthians did: follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.

Moses had no intention of doing what God called him to do. I can hear him as if I uttered the words myself: "but, but, but, who am I. I can't. I don't have the ability. I can't even talk good. Find somebody else. I'm busy. Besides they won't listen to me. Who should I say you are anyway?"

"I AM WHO I AM. – the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"

(It would have helped if God had included Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. Maybe God did, but it was lost in translation.)

OK, if you are the Great I AM, I have a question for you. Why did you wait so long to do something about the suffering of your people. It's not as if this is a new thing.

They've been crying out for generations. Why not back then, why not now?"

So many are dying in Ukraine. Why the suffering? Why the pain? Why the loss? If you're God, why don't you fix it!

That questions have haunted me the past three weeks especially; watching the news, seeing the suffering, counting the cost. The same with Covid – We are nearing six million dead worldwide, and of those one in six will be one of us in this country - one million Americans dead.

It becomes even more perplexing when the pain is suffered by those we know. I feel it when I think of the patients I cared for as a chaplain at Presbyterian Hospital. I was assigned to the oncology unit. "Why?" was a question I asked myself a lot.

I remember one woman who was being treated for third stage breast cancer. After many visits I learned that she was a professional singer, an

entertainer. Her brother had converted to one of the fundamentalist Christian non-denominations, and railed at her about “singing in bars” and “singing secular music.” He had convinced her that her breast cancer was a punishment for “her sins.”

My training about how to counsel went out the window. I lost my dispassionate demeanor, and said bluntly: “No matter what your brother tells you: Our loving God does not visit disease on us as a punishment.”

Jesus gets at that in the Luke reading today: Do you think the Galileans who were killed by Pilate, or those who died under the tower were worse sinners than anyone else?

“NO” is his resounding reply. Do you think that the Ukrainians who are dying deserve to die? Do you think the 6 million who died of Covid did something to deserve to die.

NO! Stuff just happens.

There are those who said that it was “on purpose.” God punished them for their sins or the sins of others. I read *The Purpose Driven Life* several of years ago, and though the author had some good things to say, the basic premise left me cold: Everything is on purpose. It’s all part of God’s plan.

I’m sorry. I don’t believe that. We have free will to choose. It’s a gift and a curse, but we have free will.

If everything is on purpose, there is no free will and everything is predestined.

I don’t buy it. Where God gets involved is after we choose, whatever we choose God will make the best of it, if we let God into our lives to act.

We must choose to trust God, and it’s not easy. We get a lot of chances.

The parable of the fig tree is a perfect example. I like to think of the owner as a man, who wants to rip out the tree, and the gardener, a woman, who wants to nurture the tree.

One more year of care, and then. Well, I imagine, her saying, one more year, and then... Well, she could always quote Leviticus, and ask for a fifth year, and then the harvest.

This is Lent. For me, my 42<sup>nd</sup> Lent as an Episcopalian. Each year, I cycle through the church year, plumbing new depths of meaning, but it is not circling around each year, but rather spiraling forward into new understandings of the mystery that is Life.

Each year I have sought to bring forward the learnings from the past, and to leave behind those things that hold God at arm's length – my sins.

My sins. Not deeds, necessarily, though there have been many wrongs I have done others, but rather the feelings that haunt my dreams: angers, hurts, pains, guilts, grudges, shames, doubts – you name it.

My sins: the emotional burdens I carry. The baggage that weighs me down and taps my strength, and keeps me from turning to God in times of trial because I think I am alone.

Paul did get it right in the end: “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

We are a community of sinners who have chosen to work together to do what God would have us to do. We are here for each other. We stand together not out of strength, but in our weakness. We cannot do it by ourselves, And we are not asked to.

Everything we are asked to do in the Baptismal Covenant comes with the answer:

“I will, with God's help.”

As we work our way to Easter I ask you: Harm none. Love many. Trust God.

Amen.