

Sermon for March 23, 2025
Third Sunday of Lent
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

If it weren't for the Corinthians reading
this wouldn't be a bad set of lessons to preach on.
There's Moses and the burning bush,
and Jesus and the scrawny fig tree.
Well, yes, there is the bits in Exodus about the angry God
and the reluctant Moses.
And yes, there is the bit about Galileans getting slaughtered,
or people having towers fall on them.
But we can preach around those.
It's this bit about falling short and being punished for your sins
that makes the other readings not quite sit so well.

As I've heard said:
"It is Lent, and aren't we 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."
"I know we're supposed to sign up to help with the suppers,
but I'm really busy, I don't know when I could fit it in."

No, that's not what I'm talking about.
The "yes,-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 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,
but it was the Golden Calf thing that bugged God the most.

I can almost hear the Corinthians saying: "yeah, but that was then; this is now."

True, but if we do not learn from the mistakes of the past
we are bound to repeat them.

And what was it that they did NOT learn? To turn it over to God and trust.

As Julian of Norwich is quoted as saying about Jesus and sin:
“all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well'...”

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.”
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 now?” A bigger question:
Why the suffering? Why the pain? Why the loss? If you're God, fix it!

That question haunts me whenever I feel the pain of life.
As part of my seminary requirements, I spent a summer working
at Presbyterian Hospital in Albuquerque in what's called CPE.
That stands for Clinical Pastoral Education.
I worked as a chaplain, along with five other seminarians,
and we ministered to the patients and staff.
I was assigned to the oncology unit.
“Why?” was a question I asked myself a lot.

I remember the husband of one of my patients.
He was called to the hospital in the middle of the night.
I had to tell him that his wife had died.
He asked me to call his priest, and as we sat waiting, he asked me “WHY?”
Why the pain? Why the suffering? Why his wife had to die?
We sat in the dim light of that room in silence for a while.

“I don’t know,” I told him, “but when I see God face to face, she’d better’d have a good answer.”

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.

There are those who would tell you that it was “on purpose.”
God punished them for their sins or the sins of others.
I read *The Purpose Driven Life* a couple of years ago,
and though the author had some good things to say,
a 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 pre-destined. BULL.
God part is that whatever we choose,
God will make the best of it, if we let God into our lives to act.

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Trust God? We get a lot of chances.
The parable of the fig tree is a perfect example.
I like to think of the characters as a man, the owner,
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 forty-fifth 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 keep me from God – 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 do.

We are here for each other.

We stand together not out of strength,
but in our weakness.

We cannot do it by ourselves,
but we can with God's help.

Amen!