

The 3rd Sunday in Lent (C)
March 24, 2019
Text: Luke 13:1-9

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, OR

Anthony Ruzicka is a rancher from Nebraska. In fact, he's a fifth generation rancher. His family has raised cattle in the northeast corner of Nebraska ever since they moved there from Czechoslovakia in the 1860s. But he's begun to wonder whether it's time to consider another occupation. The combination of snowmelt, together with heavy spring rain from the "bomb cyclone" that hit the Midwest, has caused historic flooding. The river flowing through his property rose, and rose, and then an old dam upriver burst, washing away everything—his farmhouse, the outbuildings and feed bins, even the log cabin his family had built more than 150 years ago. He said his farm "is completely destroyed," and he doesn't know yet how many of his cattle have died. He said, "Maybe it's a sign from God to go and do something else." ("Maybe it's a sign from God," *The Oregonian*, March 20, 2019)

It seems normal and natural to me to try to discern a message from the events in our lives, especially the hard events. Is this an indicator that there's something we should change about our lives? Should we reexamine our priorities, our goals, our expectations? Maybe it's time to choose a different path. I worry, though, when it sounds like people seem to anticipate that the message that life, or God, is sending them has something to do with punishment. It's as if they fully expect that the message they are receiving is all about judgment and condemnation: "These bad things are happening to you because of those bad things you did." And it gets especially dicey if we imagine that we can know why bad things happen to other people.

In fact, that was the very sort of judgment some people were making in our gospel reading for today. They told Jesus about some unfortunate travelers to Jerusalem. Evidently they had gone from their village in Galilee to the temple to offer sacrifice. Maybe there was some kind of trouble. The Roman governor sent troops in to put a stop to it, and the pilgrims from Galilee all wound up dead. And it seems that the conclusion some people came to was: those people must have done something really bad to deserve such a fate.

It isn't hard to understand why people engage in that sort of speculation. When bad things happen to other people, it can make us feel insecure. It can make us wonder whether something like that could just as easily happen to us. And it makes us feel better if we can "explain" things in a way that provides reassurance that life really isn't as precarious and unpredictable as it seems, and we really aren't as vulnerable as we seem.

But Jesus has no use for that kind of speculation. He doesn't try to explain anything. He flatly rejects the idea that suffering only happens to bad people, since anyone with their eyes open should know better than that. He recognizes that when bad things happen to other people, it's disturbing. It makes us feel unsettled and vulnerable. But instead of stamping that feeling of vulnerability down so it can't bother us, Jesus asks whether this might be a teachable moment. When we hear about bad things happening, when we hear about flooding in the Midwest or a plane crash in Ethiopia, does it make us aware that life is a temporary gift? Can we hear news like that as a wake-up call, inviting us to not fritter our lives away on things that don't matter, but instead invest them in acts of love? Do feelings of vulnerability cause us to hold fearfully to

the lives we try to create for ourselves, or do they cause us to turn to God in thankfulness for the gift of being alive? Do they cause us to turn with compassion and care toward neighbors in need, because we recognize—that could have been us?

Jesus' words sound harsh: "Repent or perish!" And we should be careful with words like that, because they have a long history of being used by religious cranks who proclaim an angry god who is all about judgment and condemnation. But that's not what God is like. And that's not what Jesus is up to. "Repent or perish" is a warning. Jesus warns us that a life that is all about us, all about our wants and desires, a life that is self-absorbed is finally no life at all. It's not the life we were meant to live. It's small and restricted, because it isn't turned toward God, the source of love and beauty and meaning. "Repent or perish" is a summons to turn our hearts to God, to turn our whole selves toward God to know the richness of God's love and grace.

Already that love and grace are all around us. Simply to be alive is a gift of God's love. We are like the fig tree in the parable Jesus tells. We have this life entirely as a gift. We've done nothing to deserve it. And whether we know it or not, God gives us this gift with a specific purpose—so that we can be fruitful, so that the fruit of our lives might be loving and compassionate and caring and forgiving, so that the world might be a better place because we've been here. Jesus' call, "Repent or perish," is meant to lead us to turn to God, so that—connected to the source of all that is good and beautiful—our lives might reflect that same goodness and beauty. "Repent or perish" is meant to lead to "life and blessing," not just for us, but for others as well.

So in the story Jesus tells, what happens to that fig tree that isn't producing fruit? The gardener digs manure in around the roots to help it grow strong, so that it might finally do what it's supposed to do—so that it might finally bear fruit. And Jesus' story makes me wonder about a couple of things. I wonder what sort of fertilizer is being dug around your roots. What is it that makes you stronger, more resilient? The love of family or friends? Some measure of health in body, mind or spirit? Opportunities to enjoy the beauty of the world around you? A community with which to share all that matters most? And what other things add richness and substance to your life? And I wonder what sort of fruit you are producing. How do the people who are part of your life experience what it's like to be with you? Do they see fruits of compassion and peace and joy? Fruits of forgiveness or generosity? Fruits of love, of hospitality, of serving others? In what other ways are you a source of blessing to those who are part of your life?

We have this amazing gift from the mercy of God—simply being alive. And day after day, we receive even more amazing gifts from our Creator God—air to breathe, food to eat and water to drink, shelter and clothing, friends and family, abilities to invest in the world. And on top of that, God showers us with compassion and forgiveness and mercy, and calls us beloved children of God. It's easy to forget how amazing these gifts are, and instead get caught up in the little routines of life, the worries and anxieties, the resentments. It's easy to go through life in a self-absorbed kind of way. But today, Jesus calls us to wake up. Repent and turn to God. Receive all these amazing gifts with gratitude, and let them help produce in your life fruit that is good and beautiful, a source of life and blessing. Thanks be to God. Amen