

Sermon: Fixing Nitrogen

Year C, Second Sunday in Lent using text from the Third Sunday in Lent

[Isaiah 55:1-9](#); [Psalm 63:1-8](#); [1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#); [Luke 13:1-9](#)

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Jesus is in his hometown of Nazareth, about to set off on his journey to the Cross, just beginning his ministry. And these people come to him. People he knows, because Nazareth is a pretty small place. And they lay an outrage before him. Can you believe what Pilate did? They were in the Temple, *the Temple*, offering sacrifices to God, and he had them mowed down in cold blood.

Sometimes the distance between our world and the world Jesus ministered to are not so very far apart.

The independent historical record doesn't include this event at the Temple. It does support that Pilate was a violent and an unjust man, such a terrible governor that he had to be recalled to Rome and replaced a few years later.¹ But when you are fighting for your people, do you fact check everything? One act of suppression, and the rumor mill will believe 10 others which didn't happen or were exaggerated.² It seems that we are willing to believe anything of *Them*, especially if one of *Us* telling us the story.

They're standing around Jesus, with emotions dialed up to 11, and they're waiting for him to speak. Watch what Jesus does. He asks, "*Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?*" (Luke 13:2)

If you're breathing fire because you are appalled by Pilate's behavior, then you hear that the Galileans have suffered. You hear your position being supported.

But if you are not breathing fire, if you're just standing around quiet, trying to keep out of the political hurricane that is blowing through your country, Jesus is actually cutting off a familiar retreat. I don't have to worry about those Galileans, because I'm never going to get caught in a similar situation. You're not a white supremacist. You're not a Muslim living as a minority in a Western country. Whatever bad step, mistake, failing, ignorance, anger, injustice brought those people to that point on that day, well, once they were at that point, the ending was determined.

Jesus next brings up the people from Jerusalem building the tower at Siloam. They too end up dead. Did they have it coming? Can we stop thinking about them and their families and their pain and suffering because we don't make mistakes like they did? Can we retreat back into what is familiar because we want to judge them as sinners and therefore somehow deserving of what they got? *No I tell you*, says Jesus (Luke 13:5).

So Jesus has essentially said that those who are hoping to avoid the entire situation by ignoring it, or by relying on old rules which say that God punishes sins in *this* world, they have to engage. Life matters. Death matters. Which would have gotten a hearty "Amen" from the people enraged by Pilate. Until Jesus says, "*but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.*" (Luke 13:5).

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975): 172-173.

² Kenneth Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 75.

This is not what they were expecting him to say.³ Jesus is saying in effect, “You want me to condemn Pilate. Pilate is not here. I am not speaking with Pilate. I am not ministering to Pilate. I am ministering to you. And I am telling you, you have to stop acting on your beliefs that there are only angels among Us and only devils among Them. You have to repent. You have to turn that around. Or you are heading toward destruction.”⁴ Jesus is saying, that if you want to walk in the Way, in the Way of Jesus, then you must, *you must*, acknowledge your own failings, your own limitations. And you must acknowledge the accomplishments of others. Because the old ways, ignoring it, creating distance from those whose lives are broken by the world, claiming an unrealistic perfection or deformity on either side of a divide, all those old ways are doomed.

Jesus rules out blaming the victims. And then Jesus rules out scapegoating the perpetrators. Jesus says, you who are numb with distance, you who are burning with self-righteousness, you have to come back to the reality where people live and people die and you have to live in that world. Don’t excuse the perpetrators. Don’t let them off the hook. Don’t ignore them. But recognize your role in their actions.

So if we are to do that, if we are to walk in the Way of Christ, how on earth do we do that? In this day and age, how is such a thing possible? Watch where Jesus goes next

The image of the vineyard is an image of peace, of long-term prosperity, of Israel’s golden age in the past and the promise of Israel’s future. But instead of talking about the vineyard as a whole, Jesus talks about a fig tree planted there.⁵ A single plant. A single plant that isn’t doing so well, isn’t making the most of its opportunities.

Jesus doesn’t write the plant off, dig it up, cut it down. Jesus doesn’t speak sternly to the plant and tell it to get its act together. In fact, Jesus doesn’t give the plant a deadline. The phrase that is translated “one more year” is elsewhere translated as “sometime in the future.”⁶ Jesus says, give the plant what it needs. Attention. A little more room around its roots. Food which truly nourishes it, the nitrogen it was made for.

Let me see if I get this right. I see an event like the shooting at the mosque in New Zealand, and I am supposed to repent of my own sins first? I am supposed to care about finding something to nourish a white supremacist? Give him attention? More room to spread his roots? No. Or to quote Jesus, *No I tell you*.

But I can remember what it was like as a privileged white woman, with a fine mind honed by one of the best educations money could buy, to be at one of the top ten business schools in the U.S. And to close the door to my room and weep because absolutely everything in that environment, from the administration to the dining hall to living in a dorm with six men’s rooms and no women’s rooms 30+ years after the school went co-ed, everything made it so hard to be a woman and be recognized as a scholar. I can remember what it was like to feel like I wasn’t worth half of what the guys were because I was never allowed to finish a comment in class without being interrupted. I can remember being shamed on graduation day when my mom asked me what was wrong with this place that they didn’t think girls were any good because of the 20 or so prizes handed out at the business school not one of them went to a woman. And Mom was right. That

³ Bailey, 77.

⁴ Bailey, 79.

⁵ Bailey, 81.

⁶ Bailey, 86.

place didn't think girls were any good. And I had just given them years of eating peanut butter to pay off my student loans.

That experience didn't lead me to take a gun to the school, but I can see how you get from one place to the other. So if I am going to walk in the Way, if I am going to follow Jesus on his journey to the cross, I am going to have to admit that reality. And I am going to have to reach out to those around me, hopefully long before white supremacy seems like a reasonable response and say what I know to be true:

Oh wanderer come home

You're not too far

So lay down your hurt

Lay down your heart

Come as you are

The book group has been reading Thomas Hager's *The Alchemy of Air* about the two German scientists who discover a way to fix nitrogen out of the air. They increase the agricultural capacity of the world and let thousands of starving people eat. Their discovery also prolongs both World Wars by providing the German war effort resources it needed to continue fighting. We readers, on this side of history, can see what is coming as the two scientists try to find a way forward. But the world has changed and the old ways no longer work. We watch them *labor for that which does not satisfy* (Isaiah 55:2). They both may have done the very best that could have been done. And in the end, their work has allowed us, on this side of history, to have enough food for everyone, even if we now face a distribution problem of getting the food to where it is needed.

But when we are faced with a time when the old ways are not working, what are we to do? *Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* (Isaiah 55:6-9)

What do those ways look like? They look like putting a little manure on a struggling plant. They look like getting someone what they need. Maybe not what they want, but what they need. It means seeing the devils on your side and the angels on the other. It's hard to do and no one wants to do it. We'd rather be angry and demand other people denounce the Pilate we've identified. But that is the Way of Jesus Christ. That is one of the gifts we've been given to steward in this time when all the old ways are falling away and the new ways have yet to come into being. It's a way of fixing nitrogen so that all the vines in God's vineyard can bear fruit.