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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Third Sunday in Lent*

*March 20, 2022*

*Isaiah 55:1-9; Ps. 63:1-8; I Cor.10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9*

I want to start right off the bat by saying that some of the scripture passages we've heard today have led to some spectacularly bad theology. In some Christian circles, the readings from I Corinthians and Luke have been used to condemn, to frighten, and to shame people into believing that God punishes you when you do wrong. That you suffer because you're sinful. That people get what they deserve. That bad things happen to bad people.

But try telling that to innocent Ukrainians whose homes and businesses and lives have been destroyed during the last three weeks of bombing by Russia.

Try telling that to those who are triple vaccinated and cautious but end up contracting or even dying from COVID-19.

Try telling that to the van load of student golfers from the University of the Southwest who died this week when a 13-year-old driving a pickup truck crashed into them on a Texas road.

Try telling that to climate refugees who, now and in the future, will need to uproot from where they live because of water scarcity, low crop productivity, and rising sea levels. By the year 2050, 216 million people around the world could be displaced. But is that because those 216 million people sinned more than the other 7.5 billion people on the planet?

In Luke's gospel, when some in the crowd following Jesus came to him saying that Pilate mixed some Galileans' blood with their sacrifices— basically that Pilate killed them and mixed their bodies with the animals they had brought to the temple to sacrifice—they expected Jesus to say, “wow, those terrible Galileans must have done something really bad to have that kind of horrific thing happen to them.” The prevailing theodicy – the theology of evil — at the time was that people who suffered must have been more sinful than others, that they clearly were bad people, so they got what they deserved. Like when Jesus' disciples ask him elsewhere, “who sinned,

this man or his parents, that he was born blind.” They wanted Jesus to verify a belief that they already deeply held.

Sadly, that's how some Christians operate even today. They have a need to rationalize and assign blame to evil, so they attach suffering with God's judgment. Like Jerry Falwell saying that 9/11 was God's judgement for abortion, feminism, and homosexuality. Or when people throw at others what I call “Bible bullets”—verses taken out of context to prove a belief they already hold.

That kind of theology is what leads to pain and trauma and even literal death.

I wouldn't be surprised if this is one of the reasons so many people don't go to church, maybe including some of your own family members. To be honest, I don't blame them whatsoever. I wouldn't go to church either if this is what I thought that the church teaches or what Jesus believed.

But here's the thing, even if some far-right churches wrongly do believe those kinds of things, it is not what Jesus believed at all.

Jesus didn't respond to those in the crowd that told him about the Galileans by agreeing with them that they must have done something really bad to deserve what they got, that they were worse sinners than everyone else. No, Jesus says, that's not why they died. And those who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them, it was not because they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem.

And then Jesus says this twice: but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. On first glance, it might seem like Jesus is saying, if you do bad things, you will also die like they did, but that would contradict what Jesus had *just* said—no, they didn't die because they did bad things.

I think you know that the word “repent,” *metanoia* in Greek, means to turn around and go in a different direction, but you might not know that the word “perishing,” *appolumi* in Greek, is the same word used elsewhere in the Bible for being spiritually or relationally dead or lost, like when Jesus says later in Luke, “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost,” the *appolumi*. Jesus did not mean that if you do bad things you will physically die. What he was telling the crowd when he said “but unless you

repent, you will perish like they did” was unless you turn your beliefs around and have a change of mind, you will be spiritually dead or lost, which in Jesus’ estimation was essentially as bad as being physically dead. Jesus was saying, if you keep believing that bad things happen to people because they are bad, every time you do so, you destroy your relationship with God and with humanity, which is just as serious as physical death.

The very thing that some Christians believe so strongly, that if you suffer it’s because of the bad things you have done, is exactly the opposite of what Jesus was saying to the crowd. Instead, Jesus was telling his followers that they needed to change their mind and realize that bad things happening does not equal bad people.

And then Jesus gives an example of the fig tree which for three years had not produced fruit so it seemed to be wasting the soil. But the remedy to producing fruit was to put some bad stuff—some manure—in the soil in which the tree was growing. Bad stuff didn’t destroy the tree, in fact it was the icky stuff—the manure—that made the tree bear fruit, like compost—useless scraps—that make the soil more nourishing.

I don’t know if Jesus did much gardening, but his parable makes me think that he knew that it was the crap in life that can actually be the thing that produces fruit, which undoubtedly in Jesus’ mind meant faith.

In fact, Jesus was so sure of this that in the parable he said that the tree would only need one more chance to be fruitful or it could be cut down. Jesus knew the bad stuff could work to bring about faithfulness.

I mean, isn’t that true for you? That the bad stuff which happens to you—which happens to everybody—moves you to a deeper faith, to bearing more fruit, because you know you couldn’t get through the bad stuff without God? The truth is that we don’t experience bad things because we are sinful—everybody experiences bad things no matter if they are good or bad—but it’s the bad things that happen to us in life that move us to a deeper faith and trust in God to get us through those bad times.

That’s what bearing fruit is all about—it’s about increasing our trust in the God who promises new life on the other end of bad things, it’s about bringing the goodness of God to a world where so many bad things happen,

it’s about knowing that you, beloved, precious child of God you, will always get another chance. Amen.