

**Yr. C, Lent 3**  
**March 11, 2007**  
**Preached by Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Martins in the Fields Episcopal Church**

**Lessons:**  
**Psalm 103**  
**Exodus 3:1-15**  
**1 Corinthians 10:1-13**  
**Luke 13:1-9**

“Lord, teach us to take our hearts and look them in the face, however difficult it may be.”<sup>1</sup>

It has been a tragic couple of weeks, hasn't it? Terrible storms have swept across the country, destroying lives, homes, even entire communities. Innocent people—*high school students*—killed and injured. Terrible accidents—on the freeway in Atlanta, on a boat off the coast of Malaysia—have claimed the lives of young people, even the son-in-law of our own Sandy Morrison. Terrible wars—in Iraq and Afghanistan, just to name the most obvious—killing and maiming soldiers and civilians alike, old and young. And just this week we buried a fellow priest—a child of this parish, and a healthy man—a man who was bubbling over with joy and excitement in his ministry at Still Hopes who suddenly died of a heart attack.

It was tragic 2000 years ago too. We just heard about Galilean victims who suffered not only from the brutality of Pontius Pilate's persecution of the Jews, but also the sacrilege of having their blood mixed with pagan sacrifices. And in Jerusalem we learn that 18 bystanders were crushed under the weight of the Tower of Siloam when it fell.

What did these people do to deserve this? Contrary to what the Bible says in this morning's lesson from Exodus or in places like Deuteronomy, for instance,<sup>2</sup> Jesus answers the question plainly and simply—nothing, not-a-thing.

In fact, Jesus doesn't just leave it there, he presses his followers—then and now—even further. He essentially says, “Take your hearts and look them in the face, however difficult it may be.”<sup>3</sup> This can also happen to you.”

Tragic storms, wars, violence, accidents and medical emergencies are real. And not only are they real, they are also very, very near.

As Jesus' followers in the world today, we cannot safely sit back and speculate about what happens to other people and why, as if tragedy, illness and death are phenomena that *only* happen to other people.

Especially in this season of Lent we are called to pay attention to our own souls—“to take our hearts and look them in the face, however difficult it may be.”<sup>4</sup>

So how do we pay attention to our own souls? How do we look our hearts in the face?

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Gollancz, 1935), p. 322.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 28-30 enumerates blessings and curses based upon the fidelity and righteousness of the Israelites. See also Job 4:17 and Ezekiel 18:26 for connecting curses with sins. For another instance of Jesus' rebuttal of this 'conventional Biblical wisdom' see John 9:2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 322.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 322.

We can begin by asking ourselves such basic questions as, “who am I? who is my God—or to put it another way, what is my ultimate concern in life? What is my primary purpose in life? What would I be willing to sacrifice for my ultimate concern, or for my primary purpose? How do I say things like ‘thank you,’ ‘I forgive you,’ ‘please forgive me,’ and ‘I love you’ to the people I love. How do I say these same things to my enemies?”

In case you have not noticed, asking these kinds of important and helpful questions is not routine in polite society. For that matter, asking these pointed questions is not even routine in the Church.

Yet, in today’s Gospel lesson, we have Jesus challenging our routine speculations about other people. Jesus bluntly tells his listeners to stop worrying about everyone else, and to consider their own soul. Why would Jesus do this? Why would Jesus make people uncomfortable?

I’ll tell you why. Because Jesus knew that “we are but dust.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus knew that tragedy was real, and that it was very, very near at hand—*always*.

Jesus confronted the illusion of control. He certainly made clear that *we* are not in control, safely speculating at a distance about the sinfulness of other people. I think he is also conveying that God is not in control of some Divine manipulation of tragedy as punishment for sin.

God is in control, alright. God is in control of fruitfulness. How is it that dried up seeds blossom into plants? How is it that plants flower into wheat? How is it that wheat is transformed into living bread? How is it that tiny seeds blossom into vines? How is it that vines flower into grapes? How is it that grapes are transformed into living wine? These are but two mysteries brought about by God’s relentless passion for fruitfulness.

Is the seed punished for being a seed? No, it is transformed into a living plant. Is the plant punished for being a plant? No, its purpose and energy is focused into making abundant flower and fruit. Are flower and fruit punished by being harvested? No, their purpose is to be further transformed into even more miraculous life as bread and wine.

I believe the greatest insult we humans can hurl toward God is to frustrate God’s relentless passion for fruitfulness and life. *That* is why God is intolerant of fruitless fig trees, not because they are inherently evil, they are simply refusing (or at least neglecting) to fulfill their God-given purpose.

So where are *we ourselves* lacking in fruitfulness in this parish community? I think the answers to that question are various.

For many of us, I think our fruitfulness is hindered by our busyness, for others it is greed, for some it is bitterness, and for all of us—at least to some extent—our fruitfulness suffers from just, plain neglect.

Perhaps you have noticed during this season of Lent that we begin the Liturgy of the Word with the 10 commandments and we conclude the Liturgy of the Word with the Prayers of the People, which are structured according to those same 10 commandments. So if you are unclear about

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 103:14

how your fruitfulness is hindered, just pray with the rest of us in a few moments and open yourself to the opportunity to “look your heart in the face”<sup>6</sup> and identify those places in your life where fruitfulness is stymied.

In *every* case, we fail to bear fruit because we lack having sufficient, meaningful communion with our Creator. This, in turn, causes us to lack meaningful communion with one another, sharing our hopes and dreams, our thankfulness, our forgiveness and our love.

Well that is certainly a lot of challenging news! Where, you might ask, is the Good News?

Ironically, the Good News comes in the form of that haunting sentence that we heard on Ash Wednesday when a priest smeared ashes on our heads and reminded us of our own mortality. Dear People of St. Martin’s, I am going to remind you of those words. “You are but dust, and to dust you shall return.”<sup>7</sup>

Now let’s look again at the parable in today’s Gospel lesson. Did you notice the one thing that gets priority over the fig tree? It is the soil, the dirt, the dust! God, the owner of the vineyard, says of the worthless fig tree, “Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”

Does this still not quite sound like Good News, the idea of being dust...of being mortal? Well, consider what Martin Smith writes in his book, *A Season for the Spirit*: “There is something in the human spirit that causes us to have compassion on the dying simply as the dying.” He observes that when we sit with someone who is dying, there is “no place for likes and dislikes, knowledge or ignorance. There (is) only being-with an other following our common destiny.”<sup>8</sup>

Smith quotes the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev, who wrote as follows:

“Our attitude to all (people) would be Christian if we regarded them as though they were dying, and determine our relation to them in the light of death, both of their death and our own. A person who is dying calls forth a special kind of feeling. Our attitude...is at once softened and lifted onto a higher plane. We can then feel compassion for people whom we did not love.”<sup>9</sup>

This week, Martin Smith reminded me that Lent “begins with the truth we find most difficult to accept and keep before us, that we are going to die.”<sup>10</sup> We not only deceive our selves, we also help one another deny our mortality. We fill our lives with all sorts of preoccupations in order *not* to face the truth. Therefore, when death comes near we quickly label it as a tragedy, or worse, we attribute it to someone’s sin or to some superficial need to punish on God’s part.

If we can begin to break through our denials and distractions, we can be more open to God’s desire for fruitfulness in us. We can be more open to transformation in ourselves, and in our relationship with God and one another.

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<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 322.

<sup>7</sup> Book of Common Prayer, p. 265.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit* (NY: Church Publishing, 2004, 1<sup>st</sup> pub. by Cowley, 1991), p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, as quoted in Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit*, p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit*, p. 56.

If we examine ourselves—i.e., “if we take our hearts and look them in the face”<sup>11</sup>—we will likely discover that we have an “enormous amount of unfinished business.”<sup>12</sup>

Lent is the season for dealing with all that unfinished business. Lent is the season when we honor the fact that we are dust by preparing *our* soil to receive God’s Easter life. Lent is the season when we size up our own fig trees—our ultimate concern, our purposes, our projects, and our relationships—to determine whether they are bearing fruit worthy of who God created us to be.

And this is critical—when we find those bare, fruitless fig trees; we don’t need to punish ourselves or feel badly about it. Guilt is not of God. Moreover, guilt is only a half step away from self-pity and self-loathing, which are *certainly* not of God!

No, when we find those bare trees, we just need to get rid of them in order to make room and preserve our soil for a more abundant Easter harvest.

This is how we honor who we are as dust, as dirt, as soil. This is how we honor who we are as the source for God’s fruitfulness in *this* world...and beyond. This is how we rise—with Christ—to be who God relentlessly and passionately wants us to be!

Anything less is tragic.

“Lord, teach us to take our hearts and look them in the face, however difficult it may be.”<sup>13</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 322.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Studies*, as quoted in Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit*, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 322.