

The Third Sunday in Lent, March 23, 2025
St. Michaels Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong
Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

Let us pray:

*Lord, renew our spirits and cleanse our hearts; Renew our minds and transform our lives; Renew our cities and rebuild our ruins; Renew our country and our world, in your name we pray.
Amen.*

How many times in your life have you asked — or heard someone else ask, why is there pain and suffering in the world? Why haven't we found a cure for cancer? Why can't we make progress when it comes to climate change? Why are thousands of young people in our country depressed and anxious? Why do tyrants in our world go unchecked? Why are nations embroiled in war?

In our Gospel today, we hear the same questions being asked by people surrounding Jesus, asking the question "Why?" I suppose to ask "why" is to be human. We want to understand. We want to make sense of the world. We want our lives to be logical, reasonable, orderly, and sane. Unfortunately, for many who ask the question "why," they try to make sense of life by finding blame. The people asked Jesus, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way was because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Or, did the 18 who

parished at the tower of Siloam was because they were worse offenders than others who lived in Jerusalem? Even worse, how often do we hear people blame God as a vindictive God for their suffering? But Jesus immediately said, “No, it wasn’t because of their sin; **but** unless **you** repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Jesus asked them to look at themselves before they find blame in others.

Paul in our Second Lesson writes to the church in Corinth and warns them not to blame God as their ancestors did. Paul says, “We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.”

Here in today’s Gospel, it is worth noticing the fact that Jesus spends very little time addressing this fundamental human question of “why.” In fact, he actively discourages his followers from asking it.

In a beautiful book of narrative theology entitled, *In the Shelter: Finding Welcome in the Here and Now*, poet and healer Pádraig Ó Tuama describes the Buddhist concept of “mu,” or un-asking. If someone asks a question that’s too small, flat, or

confining, Ó Tuama writes, you can answer with this word mu, which means, “Un-ask the question, because there’s a better question to be asked.” A wiser question, a deeper question, a truer question. A question that expands possibility, and resists fear.

If I could sum up this week’s Gospel reading in a single word, I would adopt Ó Tuama’s Mu. I would even argue that “mu” is a concept near and dear to Jesus’s heart. So often we are the ones who want to pin Jesus down for answers. But actually, Jesus has always been answering our questions with parables, which actually leads the listener to deeper questions for themselves.

As St. Luke describes the scene, some folks come to Jesus with headline news of horror and tragedy. Pontius Pilate has slaughtered a group of Galilean Jews, and mingled their blood with the blood of sacrificial lambs. Meanwhile, the tower of Siloam, which served as Jerusalem’s defensive system, has collapsed, crushing and killing eighteen people. The reporters accompany these brutal accounts with the question we know so well: Why? Why did these terrible things happen? Why is there so much pain in the world? Why does a good God allow human suffering?

Jesus's response? Mu. Ask a better question.

Just like many people today who ask that question, as Luke's Gospel makes clear, the people who ask Jesus their versions of the "why" question already have an answer in mind. They come expecting Jesus to verify their deeply held belief that people suffer because they're sinful. **"Those folks get what they deserve. That bad things happen to bad people."**

It's tempting for us to look at such "ancient" beliefs and feel superior in comparison. But how different, really, are the beliefs we hold about human suffering? When the unspeakable happens, what default settings do we revert to? We say things like, "Nothing happens outside of God's plan." "God is growing your character through this tragedy." "Don't worry, the Lord never gives anyone more than they can bear." "Nothing is ever lost." "Toughen up — other people have it worse."

The problem with every one of these answers is that they hold us apart from those who suffer. They keep us from embracing our common lot, our common

brokenness, our common humanity. When Jesus challenges his listeners' assumptions and tells them to "repent" before it's too late, I think part of what he's saying is this: any question that allows us to keep a sanitized distance from the mystery and reality of another person's pain is a question we need to un-ask. "Mu," Jesus says to the folks who bring him the painful news about Pilate and Siloam. "Mu," he says to us when we batter God with "why" instead of offering God our hands and feet, our hearts and souls. "Mu," Jesus warns us that we often say a lot about other people's suffering, but do nothing to alleviate it.

Jesus is essentially saying Mu. You're asking the wrong questions. Ask a better question. Ask questions that go deeper, be braver, draw closer. Repent. Which means, change your mind. Turn around. Ask questions that expands possibility, and resists fear.

If asking "why" won't get us anywhere, what kind of question will?

In typical fashion, Jesus addresses the problem with a story. A landowner has a fig tree planted in his vineyard, Jesus tells his listeners. One day, the landowner goes looking for fruit on the tree, and finds none. Incensed, he confronts his gardener: "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree," he says, "and still I

find none. Cut it down! Why should it waste the soil?” But the gardener begs his employer for more time: “Sir, let the tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Don't you find that this is an odd story to tell at such a moment? What on earth does a fruitless fig tree have to do with Pilate's heinous killing spree, or with the massive failure that toppled the tower of Siloam? What is Jesus saying?

Well, for starters, he is saying, “**Engage in story rather than platitude.**”

Platitudes are flat. Formulas are reductive. Theories don't heal. And questions that call for shallow answers aren't worth asking in the face of tragedy. But stories? Stories open up possibility. Stories include, unmake, and transform us. Ask, Why did those Galilean Jews die? Why did the tower fall? Okay, sit down, let me tell you about a fig tree...

There are many benefits to the coffee hour fellowship time after the 10 am service. We slow down and enjoy each other's company. And sometimes, we get to hear

stories about each others lives. It is in these stories that our life unfolds. They are not theories, but they are stories that answer the question “why,” they deepen our understanding of each others’ place in life, and often lead us to better care for each other in support and prayer. It is in these spaces of stories that we learn to love each other more. With Bill’s permission I can mention that many times our conversations begin and end with a lesson in life. All of us are story tellers, and this is exactly what Jesus is saying here. Before we jump to any conclusions about “who’s fault” it is, why is there pain and suffering in life, Jesus is saying, why don’t we find out more by being deeply present in someone’s life?

A parable serves an important purpose. Whenever we hear a parable, it invites questions in several directions at once, how does it apply in my life? For example,

In what ways am I like the absentee landowner, standing apart from where life and death actually happen? How am I refusing to get my hands dirty? Pronouncing judgments I have no right to pronounce? Am I prone to look for waste, loss, and scarcity in the world — or for potential and possibility? Where in my life — or in the lives of others — have I prematurely called it quits, saying, “There’s no life here worth cultivating. Cut it down.”

In what ways am I like the fig tree? Un-enlivened? Un-nourished? Unable or unwilling to nourish others? In what ways do I feel helpless or hopeless? What kinds of Tending would it take to bring me back to life? Am I willing to receive such intimate, consequential care? Will I consent to change? Might I dare to flourish in a world where I have felt invisible? Have I become complacent when it comes to repentance and amendment of life? Do I assume that I have limitless time to become fruitful? Have I forgotten that the same patient God who gives me another year to thrive will also someday call me to account?

Or, in what ways am I like the gardener? Where in my life am I willing to accept Jesus's invitation to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure? Where do I see life where others see death? How willing am I to pour hope into a project I can't control? Am I brave enough to sacrifice time, effort, love, and hope into this tree — this relationship, this cause, this tragedy, this injustice — with no guarantee of a fruitful outcome?

We as human will always ask the why question. “Why” is the question I stick in God’s face whenever bad stuff happens; I ask because I want to understand. Often I ask because I’m afraid. I ask because mystery unnerves me.

And yet, every time I ask why, Jesus answers “mu.” He says "mu" because “why” is just plain not a *life-giving* question. Why hasn’t the fig tree produced fruit yet? Um, here’s the manure, and here’s a spade — get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world? Um, go weep with someone who’s weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things. Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.

Instead of asking why, or find someone or something to blame, Jesus wants us to imagine a deeper story. Ask a better question. Live a better answer. Discover a life-giving answer. Then your why will become how. Time is running short. The season to bear fruit has come. Amen.