

Problem: What are we doing with the time given to us?

-Film and book *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed realizing a new plan for life. Driven to the edge by the loss of her beloved mother, the dissolution of her marriage and a headlong dive into self-destructive behavior, Cheryl makes a decision to halt her downward spiral and put her life back together again. With no outdoors experience, a heavy backpack and little else to go on but her own will, Cheryl sets out alone to hike the Pacific Crest Trail -- one of the country's longest and toughest through-trails. I won't give away the ending for you, but I will say that at the end of her journey the author gains a new and very important insight into life: What am I going to do with the time left that has been given to me?

-It's a question that many times we don't want to ask, but something that is on a lot of our minds, I think.

Solution: Jesus clearly lays out: If you want change to happen, it starts with you. Don't start asking the "why", but "what now?"

-Our Gospel reading from the book of Luke is a frustrating one just as much as it is powerful. Jesus seizes on two calamities that may have been subjects of recent conversation around the local watering hole (and which we don't have any other historical record of besides this text)--one an instance of state-sanctioned terror (Pilate murdering a group of Galileans for some political purpose), one a random accident (some sort of tower structure collapsing on innocent people). Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no clear apparent reason. Both kinds of events lead the rest of us to realize how precarious our existence is.

-What is frustrating for me about this text is that Jesus doesn't really approach the famous question that is on our minds constantly: why do bad things happen to good people? Why, God, do these senseless, harmful, stupid things happen that claim innocent lives? Jesus, unfortunately, doesn't answer this for us. So before you throw out this story in disgust and frustration, let me tell you: he does address another question that I think is also very important: Did this bad thing happen to these people because God was somehow punishing them for sin? Jesus is very clear: NO. To both situations that are obviously on the minds of the people around Jesus, he underlines the fact that these innocent lives were just as important to God, just as good and bad as you and me. They were people living their lives, lives that for most, were cut too short.

-So, as an aside (coming from a pastor who gets frustrated by an old, worn out theological mentality): next time you hear someone say to you after a tragedy or death "they deserved it" or "they must have not lived up to God's plan", you can say to them "that's a load of crock". That simply does not make any sense from what we know about God and how God works. Jesus powerfully points to this in scripture himself.

-Here is why we get scared of texts and why they have been used in damaging ways. It's because of verses like this: "But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." The evil word *repent* and our 19th century guilt complex clouds up, I think, what Jesus is actually saying here. The truth is: REPENT is terrible translation of *metanoia*(greek). I have said this in other sermons before, but it's worth repeating: The meaning of *metanoia* is an invitation to change our whole selves, our lives. It literally means "to turn one's whole self". NOT ABOUT GUILT OR SHAME OR PUNISHMENT!! Accept the invitation, change your heart. Accepting God's invitation to see things anew, to be in relationship with. Not a checklist because we feel sorry.

So what Jesus is actually saying here really is “unless you turn yourself, open yourself up to new relationship, new ways of trust, peace, and love of God and neighbor in the time you have left on Earth, you will perish. I don’t think when he uses the word perish he is referring to these tragedies or even physical death like we usually think. Another way to translate the Greek word for “perish” is to “lose one’s way”. Unless you turn yourself and open yourself, you will lose your way.

-Jesus is encouraging us to stop dwelling in the “why”, and start asking the “what now?”

-This is what the parable of the Fig tree is all about. This story challenges us to think about our existence. What is our purpose? What does being granted more time allow us to do? There is a comedic twist to this story as we don’t hear what happens to the tree: does it bear fruit? Is it saved? We end with the poop. The poop is spread and the time is given, now what? You know there are a lot of great things that come from poop. Flowers, trees, organisms, soil, that with time are all “turned”. Spreading the manure brings the fig tree back to its roots (both figuratively and literally) and with time gives it the proper nutrients to flourish.

Implication: Maybe Lent is the time when we realize what our purpose is. Lent is the time when the poop laid on the roots.

-On Ash Wednesday, we made the sign of the cross on our heads with the saying “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” What if manure is the same concept? Now, clearly I am not suggesting next year we spread manure over our foreheads. But, the power of coming back to our roots, of giving ourselves nutrients and a time in order to answer the “what’s next” question is pivotal. How many of us give us the real chance to do this? It’s doesn’t have to be hiking the Pacific Crest Trail either. What if just this time of Lent could be the time you give yourself to embrace the poop, too reflect on what’s next and what your purpose is?

-Every single one of us has anger, doubt, and judgement. Many of us have gone through painful loss and upheaval. Lots of us could be in a space of blaming God or sincerely asking: why? That’s OK. That’s where you might need to be right now and I am sorry that this text doesn’t give more of answer to that question.

-But, I encourage you to also embrace the poop and the time you have left. We are all children of God, and in repenting, in turning and transforming ourselves into deeper people of faith and relationship, God will transform our communities and world. “God’s work, our hands.” I think it’s time to get to work and celebrate the time we have left. Amen.