

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Third Sunday in Lent/March 7, 2010

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“There were some present,” or better translated – there were some who came, “who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” It is the story of faithful people murdered in the very act of worship. It is an outrage. It provokes retaliation. And this is the point of the storytellers who bring with them news of atrocities. They want to incite a nationalistic fervor.

Today, Oscars will be awarded to storytellers who came to tell us of *A Serious Man* whose life as he knows it is unraveling, of a teen mother named *Precious* who has to find her way from one horrific trial to another, of a Human Relations Manager whose hold over desperate employees has them *Up in the Air*. Soldiers deactivate bombs in *The Hurt Locker*, saying: “Every time you suit up... it's life or death. You roll the dice...” There is a common theme of life out of control that seems to resonate with where many find themselves today. *Avatar* holds the prospect of a civilization's demise while *Inglorious Basterds* is the retaliation for an attempted annihilation of Jewish civilization.

In times of the Roman oppression of Galileans or the dislocation of a global economic recession, atrocity storytellers come to remind us of whose we are. To whom do we belong? Depending on how we answer that question our response will be one of retaliation, heroic conquest, survival, or what Jesus urges: repentance. It is an unexpected response. The storytellers might be testing Jesus to see what side he is on. They do not expect Jesus to turn the spotlight on themselves and their audience. This type of challenge earns Jesus the hostility that will dog him the rest of his life. We would all rather throw the spotlight on someone else or some other group. In the glaring light of our disparaging gaze we retaliate, conquer, or sullenly withdraw, only to have the spotlight thrown back by the other upon us. And so begins another round of anger and alienation. This focus on the other cycles wider and wider, and grows more destructive. Jesus says, “unless you repent, you will all perish...” We

need to break the cycle of retaliation, and shine the spotlight on ourselves. This is what repentance does.

Repentance means realigning our lives with God. It does *not* mean that those who suffer do so because of their sins. It was not because they were any worse sinners than anyone else that while at worship Galileans were murdered. Nor were those more sinful who died in a work accident when a masonry tower collapsed on them. Repentance recognizes that by our retaliation and throwing the spotlight on the other, we have gotten off track. In the confession we say as much. We have become derailed. We have not loved you, God, with our whole heart. We want to get back on track; that is, to “walk in your ways.”

To walk in God’s ways, Moses has to remove his sandals from his feet for he is in God’s territory now, holy ground. A 17th century Hasidic teaching suggests that “the world is filled with sharp objects and stones. When you wear shoes, you can walk without feeling those objects.” God wants us to be vulnerable and to empathize with the distress of others, to feel the sharp objects that impact their lives. This is in fact precisely what God does. God observes the misery of God’s enslaved people in Egypt. Not only that, God has an intimate knowledge of their suffering. God comes to them to free them and calls Moses to be their agent of deliverance.

Jesus follows up the stories of the atrocity tellers with his own story about leadership. There is a crisis of leadership he declares in a parable about a barren fig tree. In the customary imagery of such tales, the owner of the vineyard and the gardener represent the justice and mercy of God. The vineyard itself is the whole household of God and the fig tree planted in it represents the nation’s leaders who should be generating repentance and peace but who are absent any such fruit. The owner is seeking the 7th year fruit that would be an offering to God. This is now the ninth year and still the branches are empty. In the imagery of the parable, there has been quite enough time for leaders to show the anticipated fruit of peace and repentance. Instead, the unproductive fig tree drains precious nutrients from the rest of the vineyard. The tree should be dug out and removed. It is the only just thing to do. God’s mercy, on the other hand, imaged by the gardener says “let it alone for one more year.” The word for “let it alone” is the same word for “forgiveness.” We need God’s forgiveness so that we can offer the fruit of repentance. Like all good storytellers Jesus uses humor. This is the only place in the New Testament that the word manure is found. He’s saying “Let’s toss a little manure at these leaders.” You

can imagine the smiles in the crowd. The serious point though is that God's grace comes from beyond us and must evoke a response from us of repentance and peace.

Storytellers ancient and modern come with tales of overwhelming difficulty. There are workplace catastrophes. Some stories recount destabilization featuring those who defuse bombs in Iraq and others who defuse family violence in our inner cities. These narratives resonate with us today. We are tempted to spotlight the blame on one or another, round and round. To continue in this way, Jesus says, is to perish. The way of life is the way of repentance, realigning our lives with God. To do that this week, we may try becoming more vulnerable in order to empathize with the hurt of others. God in fact may be calling upon us to bring them peace, as God called Moses to bring deliverance. We need to cultivate leaders who understand this way of repentance and who envision a world of well being. They may help us make sense of our stories, seeing in them the holy One to whom we belong, who knows our sufferings and whose promise calls us forward toward abundant life.

Amen.