

3 Lent – Year C – March 7, 2010
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 63: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9
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Many years ago, the admiral of an aircraft carrier was leading his own ship and the fleet through an area of dense fog. Always a disconcerting experience for any vessel, including you and me. We rely so much on all our senses, and especially our sight, that any impairment in our vision leaves us feeling very vulnerable indeed. For ships, radar provides some help. We might ask who or what we rely on when things become foggy or unclear. In this instance there is clearly someone else out there, because a message is received requesting that the admiral steer his ship, and direct the whole fleet, to a course ten degrees north in order to avoid a collision. It is a simple fact of life that most of us really like to be in charge, the captain of our own ship if you like. Change is also disconcerting and difficult for us. It is also true that if we are given a choice, most of us point to someone else – our spouse, our partner, our workmate, our boss, anyone except ourselves – and demand that *they* change to accommodate *our* needs. Finger pointing, and laying the blame at someone else’s feet is much easier than making changes in our own way of thinking or behaving. So perhaps predictably, the admiral promptly sends a message back saying, “this is the U.S. aircraft carrier Lincoln and fleet, YOU steer ten degrees south to avoid a collision.”

If we have been paying attention to the ominous signs in the readings from the Gospel of Luke, then we have seen and heard Jesus butting heads with the devil, with the Pharisees, with His own disciples, and even with traditional interpretations of Torah. Precisely the sort of thinking that is expressed in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus’ life and teachings are radical, new and different from anything that has gone before. In many ways, it cuts through the fog of exclusionary Pharisaic rules and regulations that have little to do with God’s commandments, but a lot to do with establishing power and promoting self-righteousness. Jesus’ death and resurrection provides **the** way of salvation for the life of the whole world. It also continues to challenge the thinking of the whole world, by pointing to a new way of establishing true justice and Godly power through love, service, and selfless sacrifice. Both sides of Jesus’ life demand a response, and two aspects of our Lenten preparations are highlighted in this reading. The first is self-examination: Jesus’ call for each of us to recognize our own contribution when faced with disasters and accidents. The second is sincere repentance. As we will see and hear, each part of our Lenten review requires a large helping of humility. If we are diligent we will also see that there are at least two other gifts revealed for us.

In the first part of the Gospel reading Jesus is told about yet another egregious act of violence on the part of the Pilate. Some might say it was a deliberate act of provocation to stir up the Judeans. Some would surely say that it was yet another example of Pilate’s ignorance and insensitivity to the people he governs. And yet others would say that this is another way to tempt Jesus. That is to force Jesus into taking a stand against the tyranny of Rome in anger at the terrible injustice of the crime. In fact, Jesus wastes no time on defining Himself or His people, by the acts of an enemy. Instead, Jesus goes immediately to a new interpretation of a traditional and widely held view of the connection between sin and punishment. The Hebrew Scriptures, particularly Deuteronomy, define the connection between disobedience to God’s will and curses or punishment. It is a simple cause and effect equation: personal sin will evoke God’s wrath and personal calamity. On the other hand, obedience to God’s will results in blessings.

A notable exception to this rule is found in the Book of Job, the righteous man of God who suffers terrible catastrophe for no apparent reason. Jesus also rejects the notion that only bad things happen to bad people. Explicitly, Jesus challenges His hearers, “do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” He goes on to give another example with the same answer, “No.” While not denying that there are consequences to sin, Jesus says that for the people, such tragedies are to be interpreted as early warning signs of impending

and universal disaster. He also challenges His hearers to understand that there is a way to avert God's judgment through community-wide repentance. In Paul's letter to the Romans he picks up the same idea and expresses it in this way, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Instead of being able to point a self-righteous finger at those sinful Galileans, or at the presumed disobedience of the workers who died in the accident at Siloam, Jesus tells the people to point their fingers at themselves as equally deserving of God's judgment. Jesus' response is a significant change from traditional teachings of His time. For followers of Christ, in this day and age, who are already clothed in righteousness by virtue of God's grace and our faith in Christ, there is a pressing question. Our sins are already forgiven, so what difference does it make to us whether we repent or not? Knowing how hard it is for us to change, what compels us to change course, and turn our behavior around so dramatically? Paul poses the same question, "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1).

You will recall the dilemma of our admiral who demands that the other party respect *his* wishes to avoid an impending collision. Another communiqué quickly arrives in response, "this is seaman Riddle, you **must** steer ten degrees north to avoid a collision." The admiral's pride, or lack of humility here, is like an accident waiting to happen. Back in Palestine, Jesus goes on to tell his listeners a parable. The owner of a vineyard has a fig tree and has come over a three-year period looking for fruit. The fruitful fig tree is often used in Scripture as a symbol of blessing on the lands. Interestingly enough fig trees do not produce fruit in the first three years, and so this fig tree may well be six years old. The implication being that the owner has allowed the tree to mature and given it plenty of opportunity to produce fruit, but it remains barren. In an agrarian society, where the fruitfulness of trees and crops is the difference between life and death, it is inconceivable to keep a barren tree that is just "wasting the soil". Yet the parable suggests a reprieve for the fruitless fig tree, by the intervention of a third party who is willing to labor around the roots of the tree, and provide fresh nutrients. His offer is nothing less than a plea for mercy in the face of a seemingly hopeless cause. Such is the extravagance of God's divine mercy that creates the space for, and the possibility of hope. Hope against judgment, and hope for the future. Such is the abundance of God's love that offers time for repentance, and therefore the possibility of renewed fruitfulness through obedience to God's will.

By now, our admiral is thoroughly agitated by the apparent insubordination, and can only hear in the seaman's responses a blatant challenge to his authority. The admiral sends his response: "This is Admiral Wright, I DEMAND that YOU steer ten degrees south." Quick as a flash, a new message arrives, "Hello admiral, this is seaman Riddle again, please note that I am the lighthouse keeper...!" Someone once wrote that, "To repent is to alter one's way of looking at life; it is to take God's point of view instead of one's own." Jesus is not only sharing a new perspective with his listeners about their need to repent, He is also emphasizing that when we see the signs, there is no time to waste, our response is required now. As our story of the admiral and the fleet also illustrates, we may well be on a collision course with disaster if we think that we can ignore the signs, and when we take the position that it is someone else's responsibility to change, rather than our own.

St. Augustine once said something like, "Love God, and do what you like!" Now there's a loaded invitation, if ever I heard one! You and I know who is really steering the ship. As we continue our Lenten voyage of discovery, let us invite the Holy Spirit to clear the fog, and open the eyes of our hearts. Let us each receive with gratitude the gift of freedom in Christ that both desires and compels us to be transformed according to God's will. In humility, let us also open our arms to bless others with the light of Christ to guide their way to the harbor of God's gracious love in the Lord.

Amen.