

Jesus and Creation

March 20, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Jaz Buchanan

Texts: Luke 13:1-9

Sighs. This is a tough passage. During our staff meeting this past week, I was so tempted to ask, “does anyone want to switch preaching dates?” Thinking - how the heck did I end up with this one?

I think many of us, if not all of us here and online, can relate to the people gathering around Jesus, sharing with him all the horrors they have seen and heard about.

Pontius Pilate, Roman governor of the province of Judea, a ruthless ruler, (and probably for no reason) attacked and murdered Galilean Jewish pilgrims worshipping at the temple. While they were offering up their religious sacrifices, Pilate’s troops killed them. Mixing their blood with the blood of their animal sacrifices. A brutal and horrific death.

And then... there were the eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam (sigh-loam) fell on them. Absolute devastation.

This is a lot to take in just a few sentences into our passage this morning. Maybe not all that far from opening up the NY Times, Boston Globe... all the many different news sources we may tune into.

I know I find myself turning to Jesus this morning with the horrific news happening in Ukraine. Heart wrenching violence in Mariupol where

Russia bombed a theater sheltering hundreds, including children. News that makes you sick to your stomach.

A week after a children’s hospital and maternity ward was bombed. Just this morning I saw a headline describing Russian soldiers storming an apartment complex nearby Kyiv and holding resident’s hostage.

At least 900 civilians have been killed (the UN believes the number to be higher), nearly 3,000 Ukraine soldiers, 7,000 Russian soldiers.

This morning, I am with those who gathering around Jesus in our scripture today, asking him why? How did we get here? Where war devastates around the world. Where we as people kill one another?

How did we get to a place ...a place where we are killing the very planet we live on? Scientists are telling us we just experienced the hottest decade in human history... a decade that will also be the coolest our children and grandchildren will experience.

How did we get to a place where the people affected the first and the most by the climate crisis, whether here in Boston area or across the globe, are also the least likely to have a voice at the table where policies are being made?

A place where we are still fighting for reproductive rights in this country. Where gender affirming care is a freaking debate if not labeled as child abuse. A place where we criminalize trans kids and their parents. Where our own state governments are seeking to control our bodies. trans folx, nonbinary folx, cisgender women.... It is too much. Too much.

And none of this is even accounting for COVID, and the very things we are carrying in each of our own lives.

With that, I invite us to take a collective breath. To place our hands-on hearts. To feel our heart beat. In just the first several minutes of this sermon, I took us to a heavy place. A place you might already be in.

Clearly, I am. There is a lot happening around us. A lot to hold. A lot to tell Jesus this morning.

This past Wednesday, a few of us gathered for the Hanging out with God group, Lexi and I have been hosting. We sat with this morning's scripture, talked about it, in the context of world news and our own lives.

We went deep – perhaps this is a shameless plug, in case you are like geeze that sounds awesome, I want to theologically reflect with a refreshing drink on Wednesdays at 5:30pm on Zoom... come join us.

In our gathering, we all admitted that as we share with Jesus the horrors around us, we are looking for the Jesus who comforts. The Jesus who holds your hand and says everything is going to be okay.

But what does our scripture tell us? How does Jesus respond?

“Unless you repent, you too will perish.”

I mean COME ON, Jesus. For real?!? This is what you have for us. We lay it all out. Share with you with what keeps us up at night and you tell us to repent?

As a staff when we were planning for Lent this year, we all agreed that we do not need to be reminded of our mortality, loneliness, anger, grief.

We have already been in two years of Lent. Let's go gently this year.

Let's move with Jesus as our center, focusing on his life and teachings and how they can ground us in these times.

Each week in our contemplative prayer gatherings, I have been asking folx to go gently with themselves. Make this time what you need it to be.

Past couple of years have been full of enough stress and uncertainty.

And what do we get this morning. A Jesus calling us to repent. “Repent, or you too will perish!”

Seriously, Jesus.

As Jesus and I tangled, I looked at what he said leading up to the word, repent – “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!”

Jesus says, “I tell you, no!” He can feel what is on people's minds. They are trying so hard to rationalize what is happening. Looking to blame.

And Jesus replies, you think they are suffering because they sinned worse than you? No!no!

You think this horrible devastating thing happened to them because they somehow deserved it? A tower in Siloam fell on eighteen people because they did something to provoke such a violent response?

The answer is confident and clear. It is an Absolute no.

Sometimes, bad, horrible things happen and there is no one to blame. COVID-19 was no one's fault. Viruses spread and mutate.

This past summer when I worked at Beverly Hospital, I found myself at times sitting with patients who would ask themselves, why me? And sometimes even say to me, "Jaz, I did this. If I just took better care of myself.

If I ate better. Exercised more. Drank less." The list went on. You name it. I wanted so badly to jump right in, shutdown the train of thought and say, this is not your fault, but each time, I stopped myself and instead just listened. Tears in their eyes. Tears in mine.

As I got to know each patient I realized - none of them really believed they caused their illness. None of them really believed what they just said. They knew deep down there was nothing they could have done to change their current situation.

It was scarier to admit that they did not have that kind of control. For some of the patients I talked with, self-blame was the last step towards realizing there was nothing they could have done to change their current prognosis. "If only... x, y, z" was something they needed to say out loud. With tears, with anger, with sadness, because realizing that you do not have that kind of control is scary.

Facing the truth that illness happens. Bad things happen. That's scary.

As the people gather, trying to make sense of Pilate's violence against the Galileans worshipping, Jesus also pushes against victim blaming. In a fairly victim-blaming American culture we live in, this in itself is such a crucial message for us. I know I am preaching to the choir here when I ask, you know the number one reason why there are people who are housing insecure? Why there are people who have no choice but to live on the street?

"Unaffordable housing." That's it. The number one reason. It is that simple.

We like to point blame. Tell someone else to pull up their socks and get themselves a job.

Yet, rent is completely unaffordable. Minimum wage is not enough to live on. Poverty is not personal failure. It is a systemic one.

“Are people hungry or housing insecure because they sinned worse than the person next to them?”

Jesus says, hell no.

Sometimes in the face of hardship, in this desire to control, we as humans reach for power. We start wars. We take all the resources from the earth because we can. We deem some life more important than others because we can. We create lies, propaganda, fake news...

We pretend that what we are doing to the planet is not killing it and that we can control how the earth will respond.

And Jesus us knocks us over with reality – “no!”

He looks at the people gathering around them and says, this was not the Galileans fault. Look at the world you live in. Look at Pilate who kills because he can. Do not avoid what is really going on here. Don't pretend like the Galileans had it coming for them.

And the thing is he is not just telling us to accept this truth. This morning's passage is not offering passive advice. Jesus doesn't tell us, well that's just life – throw your hands up in the air, accept whatever comes, because you have no real control. People will take power to do evil, deal with it.

No! In fact, he calls us to action.

He says, “repent!”

God is not a God who punishes. So that thing you are thinking – they sinned so they were punished – put that out of your head.

Do not avoid the fear, grief, anger, and pain you are holding. Do not draw up barriers and walls and avoid the truth.

No, he says, repent!

Don't deny your own vulnerability. Do not walk away from your God-given humanity. Don't walk away from yourself. Of course, you are going to struggle with hope. Of course, you are going to question if a better world is possible. Of course, you are going to wonder does it matter if I show up to that demonstration, call my legislator, give money, attend that meeting...

Repentance is meeting yourself where you are at. It is trusting God with all the messy and ugly parts of yourself that is hard to confront. It is trusting God will always be there no matter what. With wide open arms. Every week in worship, we confess. We repent and what is God's response? I love you! What is always the good news? God loves us no matter what. And we receive this news and we share it with one another. We do this every week because we need to.

God declares God's love for all her creation. No ifs, ands, or buts. No stipulations, conditions, or limitations. In response, we are called to share God's love abundantly.

Jesus is telling us this morning, no! don't deny your vulnerability. For that place is holy ground. Vulnerability is sacred. Trust God is present. Embrace me, Jesus, as your center. I will hold you.

As one theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, who I always hold dear, says Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt, you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

That notion that good or bad things happen to good or bad people, was put to rest when Jesus died on the cross. There was nothing that could have been done to stop it. We know each year as we move through Lent, Good Friday is coming no matter what. Just as we know the resurrection, Easter is coming, no matter what.

We are not in control, Jesus says. When we pretend we are in control, we seek power, we choose destruction.

And then he gives us a parable. About a fig tree. How one person was about to cut it down because it was not bearing fruit. Then the gardener said, no.

I ask us to imagine for a moment that Jesus is the gardener, saying no. Let me tend to this fig tree. Let me take care of it.

For when we repent, when we relinquish this fantasy we are in control, when we confess we are imperfect, but worthy, when we confess we are struggling to hope, to believe, we surrender ourselves fully to God, we embrace Jesus as our center.

Opening ourselves up so that Jesus can tend to our hearts. When we realize we do not have control, we are exposed. We are vulnerable. Leaning into that vulnerability, we can grow trust and turn away from power and hierarchy and destruction.

When we lean into our vulnerability, we lean on God, and we lean more on one another. We respond as a collective. Being in right and divine relationship with each other. With each living being.

When we embrace our vulnerability, we realize we are fully dependent upon one another. Depend upon every living being. Every creation. We depend upon the very earth.

It is then. It is in that very moment; the fig tree begins producing fruit. For this is not the kind of work that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

Amen.