

The Jews certainly believed in the wages of sin – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You are going to reap what you sow. They connected health and illness with pleasing God or going against God. Job's friends knew that he was guilty of some sin and was being punished by God for his evil ways.

Our Luke text for today begins with this assigning blame and suffering to those who do not please God. There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. They were actually in the temple preparing sacrifices when Pilate had them killed. Perhaps Pilate thought they were insurrectionist. Jesus reminded them of the eighteen Galileans who had perished when the tower of Siloam they were building fell on them. Does it mean the men sacrificing in the Temple were worse than them? Those building the tower were considered offending God because they were paid for building the tower from Temple funds confiscated by Pilate. Jesus refuses to let them blame God for punishing them for their sins. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Perish not because of the punishment of God, but perish because they had not lived out their calling. Jesus is being a realist. Calamity is no respecter of persons. Jesus sees the nation headed for disaster. He refuses to join the insurrectionist. One, it is a blood bath of futility. They are not going to oust the Romans. Two, there is no guarantee that the insurrectionist leaders and Caiaphus would lead Israel any more nobly than Rome. God had created Israel and called them out to be a light to the nations. Their mission is to make God known to the whole world. This repentance is a call for the nation to be the People of God. Repent. It means to change your direction. This power and amassing riches and pleasing other governments is not the way for Israel. Israel's blessing was not material. Their blessing was bound to the Covenant to be God's people. They had a whole lineage of prophets. Their commission was to make God's way known to the earth.

So Jesus is asking them to quit trying to blame God for calamity in their lives. He is calling them to repent, to change direction and be the people God called them to be.

Jesus tells them a parable of a fig tree. What is the purpose of a fig tree? Well leaves and shade are nice, but the purpose of a fig tree is to bear fruit. A man had fig tree planted in his vineyard. He comes looking for figs and finds none. So he told the gardener that this was the third year, and he had never gotten any figs. The tree was just wasting good soil. "Cut it down!" There is no symbolism in the three years. It just means that there was plenty of time for the tree to bear some fruit.

But the gardener wanted to give it one more try. "Sir, let it alone for one more year. I will dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears no fruit next season, you can cut it down."

I think of God as being like that gardener. "Let me try that one more time." It is already the middle of lent. We are in the midst of ordering our lives to be more pleasing to God. God is not going to zap us like the owner wanted to zap the tree. We have time to repent, to change our direction.

A member of my congregation was arrested for armed robbery and was in big trouble with the law. I went by his parent's home and told them I was sorry for the trouble and was going to see him in the hospital. Their reply was foreign to me. "There is no reason for you to go. He is not going to ever do any better. He is no good – has always been like that. You are wasting your time." I went down to the hospital to see him. He and his partner in crime were robbing a store a night. The police patrol car spotted a light in the store. They proceeded to check it out. When the robbers ran, the police fired at them. They hit my church member in the elbow. Now he was in University Hospital. I got some

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magazines and went to see him. After searching me and making me leave my keys, billfold, the armed guard let me in to see him. I really didn't know him, but told him who I was and that I had come to check on him. His elbow had been shattered and his whole arm was held up by a sling so it could begin to heal. "Can you get me out?" I told him that I didn't think I could do that. "Do you know the Judge? Can you get me off?" I assured him I did not know the judge, that the trial had not even been set. I offered him the magazines. "I want you to get me out of here." Finally I asked him if he knew he was arrested for armed robbery and that he was definitely going to spend time in prison. I told him I had to leave. He replied, "I hope you will come back and get me out of here." A couple of hours later he managed to get by the guard and probably would have gotten out of the hospital if he had not fallen in the stair well and could not get back up.

Looking back on that, he wanted to get out, he wanted to try again. Hopefully not to try the robbery again. We have all been in that situation – not arrested for armed robbery – but wishing and wanting to try again. We know we could do it better the next time. We say words that come out wrong and we want to try that again. We take a test and before we even get the results we want to try that again.

On Ash Wednesday, the words that spoken as the ashes are placed on our forehead are, "Repent and believe the Gospel." The gospel simply means "Good News." The good news from our gospel lesson today is that God is pleased when we want to try again.

God is pleased when we change our direction to a new and good direction. Lent is a good time to remember that God is calling us to try again.