

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent  
 March 7, 2010  
 Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Buffalo NY  
 Pastor Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When you step into a text like the one we have before us this morning taken from Luke's gospel, you have to be careful about drawing any conclusions about what the author's intent was if you don't look at the text as it appears in its complete context, namely, where does it sit within the whole narrative and what came before it and what follows it.

We see what happens when you don't do this, most clearly and to ill effect, in the political arena of our day. How many times have we been fed a snippet of some opponent's speech from 10 years ago that illustrates how he is out of touch with the contemporary situation. How many political commercials have we been subjected to in election years that take out of context an opponent's words and twist them, or better spin them, so that they appear to say one thing when in fact they may have meant something else entirely?

So it is with the text we have before this morning from St. Luke's gospel. It starts off with an obscure, and some believe, a-historical reference to the accusation that Pontius Pilate, then Roman governor of Judea, in his disdain for those he ruled in Galilee, often had them killed and their blood comingled with the blood of the sacrifices they brought to temple. To make the offense graphically clear, it would be as if Governor Patterson gave the order to have one of you killed out in the parking lot before worship and then take some of the blood spilled in the incident and have it mixed in with the communion wine.

The second example Jesus refers to is the collapse of the tower by the pool of Siloam. The pool of Siloam was a major water source for the people of Jerusalem. Accordingly, it had to be protected from any outside invasion or potential contamination, as invaders knew that if they poisoned or captured a city's water source, they could easily win any militaristic engagement. So the water source at Siloam was fortified not only with a high wall, by also a high tower, some say 30-40 cubits above the height of the city wall upon which it was constructed. This would put the height of tower some 75 to 100 feet above ground level. Well, according to archaeological evidence, the tower at Siloam was poorly constructed and during its construction, collapsed during the time of Jesus, killing 18 workers. Studies show that the concrete came from New Jersey.

Anyway, after giving these two examples, he adds a parable:

*A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'*

What on earth is all this about?

Well, it's like I said, you have to go back to Luke and see what prompted the story.

If you go back, even 10 verses, you'd see that Jesus was attempting to bring about the awareness that catastrophe was at the doorstep and that the current, and I mean by that, current first century Jewish attitudes toward Rome, would not result in a good ending. If you go back 10 verses, to chapter 12 vs. 54, Luke has Jesus saying this, *"When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming' and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*

Jesus message was not political but it had political implications. Jesus was calling for the Jewish nation to reexamine what it meant to be God's chosen, especially in light of the Roman occupation. Jesus saw the mounting resistance to his movement, the strained relations between Jew and Gentile, the frequent and violent outbreaks of patriotic frenzy, and the growing severity with which these outbreaks were being suppressed and just as in the days of Isaiah, whose warning you read in our first lesson, as the Assyrian threat to Israel mandated a call to repentance, so now the Roman threat to Israel calls for an immediate "turning around" and "change of heart," if in fact the community was to survive.

If nothing changes, if the way you do business with the world remains the same, if the answer to how you are supposed to live rests

- in focusing your attention on how to stick to the Romans,
- in bickering with me over the finer points of Jewish law,
- in proclaiming yourself the chosen and the privileged instead of focusing on the issues of justice and equality
- on peaceable and productive living
- of charity and generosity
- on acts of mercy and kindness then you can expect the same ending as those **you** thought "got what they deserved."

If nothing changes, if the way we do business with the world remains the same, if what we spend most of our time and energy on:

- Are what celebrity lifestyles are comprised of
- How much more we can pay our professional athletes
- What new pill we can take for yet another disorder be it restless legs, insomnia, fibromyalgia, or simply to keep the hospital gurney from following us around on the golf course
- Or how many more devices we can invent to keep us distracted and to keep us from getting bored, or God forbid from doing something productive like reading, or studying or volunteering or spending time with our families

If, as a nation, we spend more money

- on war than education,
- on rebuilding infrastructure in countries we've had a hand in destroying than on our own bridges and highways, hospitals and schools,
- if we pay more attention to sticking it to the other political party than crafting responsible and sustainable legislation,
- if those we elect to positions of responsibility have time enough to have affairs in South America, keep mistresses while on the campaign trail, have their full time paid aides scalping playoff tickets
- if we continue to allow lobbyists to overrule voters

- if those in our prisons have access to better health care than our veterans, larger libraries than our inner city kids, and better access to the legal system and representation than hard working and legal immigrants

If you expect your children to grow up spiritually sound and ethically motivated, to be generous and kind, concerned for others and be morally grounded and yet don't bring them church or expose them to the tenets of the faith, the literature of the ages, or the persons of history who have shaped it.

If you value the next generation, and allow your government to pay for heated seats in football stadiums owned by millionaires, give incentives to private corporations to build and live tax free in your cities, but yet can't seem to find enough money to keep the public parks open, the beaches clean, the water flowing, the nursing homes solvent and one or two more processing lanes open at the Peace Bridge.

If you come to the fig tree year after year, season after season, expecting it to bear fruit and yet do nothing to bring it about, well, the time will come when it no longer makes sense for it to remain in the garden taking up space.

Jesus has a point.

Amen.