

Sermon: Year C, III Lent
Texts: Exodus 3:1-15
I Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

I was reminded this past week of one of the more memorable lines from Clint Eastwood's masterful film *Unforgiven*. In the film, three men, the perfect stereotypes of gunslingers from classic Westerns, have set out to exact revenge on a group of cowhands, one of whom had viciously assaulted a woman working in a small town brothel. A sizable reward is offered for his head. Two of the gunmen are old veterans at this hard business. The third is brazen and young. His boastfulness betrays his lack of experience. Having tracked down the cowboys, a battle ensues, and the task of assassination falls to the youngest of the three hunters. Prompted by the others to live up to his big talk, he catches the wanted man off guard, and, as is often said in the movies, he kills him in cold blood. A short while later, after all the gunfire has stopped, the gravity of the act catches the young assassin off guard too. He is sickened by what he has done, and he admits then that all his boasts had been lies. He had never done anything like this before – he had never shot a man – and now, having succeeded, the horror of the murder he has done is more than he can bear. His body is slumped and he shakes with regret. Observing this, the grizzled, older gunman takes a long drink of whiskey and he coolly sums up the nature of their work. Looking nowhere in particular he says, "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. [You] take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have."

There's not much that needs to be added to this line. It's powerfully comprehensive. Someone has been killed, about whom we know almost nothing. But in that act something immense has been destroyed – not just a life or a body, but an entire past built and kept in memories, collected possessions and personal relations. And no less dramatically, that same blind moment has erased the possibility of a boundless future, all the many things, beyond imagining, that might have been too. What, in theory, had seemed so easy, especially in the logic of Westerns, where black hats and white hats clearly delineate the sharp distinctions of right and wrong, suddenly, in reality, became dreadful and insufferable. Someone had everything taken away from him by another – everything, which, within the parameters of one life alone, is more than we can ever count or assess. All leaves no remainder. It's the sole word that indicates the true measure of death. Eastwood's words are direct and unwavering. "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. [You] take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have."

In light of this, we may ask, as the Gospel reading today prompts us, what, then, constitutes a tragedy? If any single death entails this degree of loss, what special circumstances make one death more horrific than another? Tragedy is a strange measure, even though we make it easily and regularly. It's tragic, we say, when death comes in an untimely fashion – when it is unsuspected and immediate, when it strikes the young, when all that we expect is wiped away by an accident, an interruption from out of nowhere. It's tragic, too, we say, when someone dies undeservedly, when death strikes someone who is considered a good person, still vibrant, still pursuing dreams, when it takes down a hero or someone who, in youth, is still considered innocent. Tragedy is the dilemma of terrible things happening to wonderful persons, for this is not the quid pro quo we expect or can accept. Yet it's the question we cannot avoid, just as the people in Jesus' time needed an answer to the several tragedies that had occurred in their midst. How does one deal with these ruptures of what is normally expected?

The impulsive response often made is that our tragedies must be, somehow, the sudden register of God's judgment of our lives. They signify, however opaquely, divine displeasure, and, thus, though no one else may know the cause or the spark of God's punishment, we

deserve the harm that comes our way. There must be, we presume, a hidden formula that justifies the evil that befalls us; by God's calculus, this must be what we have earned. Pilate desecrated the bodies of several Galileans. Was it on account of something they did? The tower of Siloam fell, killing eighteen; they must have been marked by a particular sinfulness. Such questions fill the narratives of our Scriptures. They still haunt us now when tragedy hits, in the gnawing fear that punishment has come because of our own misdeeds. Guilt, like disaster, can be pretty indiscriminate.

And conversely, we also look just as much for the assurance that, if we live well and do what is right and proper, we will naturally be safeguarded. Tragedy marks our vulnerability, but we like to think that its absence represents the immunity we feel we can put in place by following the rules, the laws, and the commands of faith. Luke's text can be read in just this way, as a confirmation of this staunchly held conviction. Tragedy is the execution of God's righteous anger, delivered against poor souls who have not corrected their ways. But we have available to us repentance, and repentance is the discipline that sets us right again. We confess our shortcomings with great remorse, and, from out of this self-assumed humility, God's favor returns again, and, thereby, tragedy is deferred.

This, however, reveals a certain shallowness. For it superimposes on God the relatively petty judgments we ourselves make against one another, presuming that God must be like us, only greater. When, what may really be asked of us, is that we understand the world, in God's name, far more divinely and deeply, at a level where tragedy has no enduring place. For we should note: in both cases presented to Jesus, he explicitly denied that sin or guilt or any form of divine displeasure caused the events cited. They happened, but not at the behest of God or as a result of his anger. They happened... but they could not be fully understood apart from Jesus' own role as one who would suffer similarly – in order to show that God takes no active part in tragedy at all, but measures his world by a wholly different standard, which is, without exception, in Jesus, the redemption of all things, a redemption that ultimately extinguishes all tragedy, showing it to be our mistake, not God's misgiving.

In order to see this, we need to perceive repentance in a different light and a more dramatic way. It is not, as it is so commonly taken to be, just the small act of our own penance, *our* expression of *our* sorrow for *our* guilt, all of which is thoroughly self-centered. Repentance, more profoundly, is the task of turning our eyes to see the whole of the world through the immensity of the grace of God, from beginning to end, as alpha and omega, as the gift that permeates all life. This entails adjusting the most fundamental convictions we hold. The world, thus, ceases to be brute material and fact onto which we project values and meaning. Rather, the whole expanse of reality, the very time and space of our universe, is the present manifestation of the dynamic will of God, which was begun in love, is rife in beauty, is progressing forward in the continuous unfolding of hope, and is moving toward a consummation in reconciliation, peace, and infinite unity. To speak of creation isn't to suggest only that some abstract God had to get the ball rolling billions of years ago. It is the conviction that everything begun and everything to come exists always within the covenant of promise initiated by YHWH and completed in Jesus Christ.

Having been, therefore, means receiving an infinite future. What is once given cannot be lost. For every perishing is met by resurrection, and, therefore, no someone, whoever that may be, can ever be brought to nothing. The measure of God surpasses the measure of man, and consequently, every tragedy is overwhelmed by God's greater passion. We, by our judgment, enacted the tragedy of the cross against God himself. He, by his infinite grace, transformed even death itself into the victory of life and forgiveness.

At the far reaches of faith, it is possible to envision this truth, that each vivid and wrenching experience of tragedy can be better understood more vividly as the place where God's self-

giving, communion, and promise will reach supreme expression. Remorse isn't our chief task. How pathetic that would be. The courage to give voice and flesh to redemption, even in the face of disaster – that is the heaven we can offer, the manifestation of the kingdom of God, the rule of Christ, made real in us for the sake of the world. The work of the church is not the privilege to threaten others with God behind us. It is, rather, that we may live, emphatically countering the hell Clint Eastwood marked so curtly, when life ends as the loss of everything. In contrast, we may hold steadfast, instead, to the conviction that all giving in this world ends in gathering, not in losing. Every end, of life, of world, of all that has ever come to be, is not collapse; it is, rather, and magnificently, telos, goal, and fruition. That word is worthy of God, and it is given to us to speak and to live.

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