

Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

I'm not sure how I follow Patti's act last week, although I do have that one pictorial illustration up on the website. That was just so sweet and kind and playful. This week's scripture should have horror movie music behind it, it's so ominous. The passage is laced with death and foreboding, from the Judeans telling Jesus about a nightmarish episode in which Pilate had killed Galileans making a sacrifice, to an anecdote about people being killed randomly when a tower fell, to a fig tree in danger of its life, and finally to the direct threat to Jesus' life from Herod. It's not uplifting! But let's take a closer look.

Jesus' time in Galilee is over, and he has "set his face toward Jerusalem," with a grim determination to beard the lion in its den. Today's scene is of some people who want to talk about a horrific, sacrilegious slaughter of innocent pilgrims by the governor Pilate—perhaps they bring it up to see what Jesus will say. Jesus treats their question as a question about suffering and divine justice, and says that although those deaths were *not* a punishment for sin, his listeners will die the same way unless they repent. Same with the people on whom the tower fell. It *wasn't* a punishment for their sins, but you people will perish the same way unless you repent. It sounds like he's kind of fed up with them, like they're standing around baiting him and trying to get a sound bite out of him by telling titillating horror stories, and he wants to shut them up. He wants them to take seriously the moral weight of their lives and their choices, and their own vulnerability to atrocities like those they've brought up, instead of acting like kids around the campfire.

Then he tells the parable of the fig tree, in which the tree has failed to bear fruit and the owner wants to chop it down but his gardener wants to give it another year, during which he'll

lavish more attention and resources on the tree. The take-away from that story is also ominous: you've bought yourself a year, tree, but the ax is right there in the toolshed, ready for you if you fail to produce again.

Finally, some Pharisees come to Jesus, maybe trying to freak him out and make him go away, and tell him that Herod is out to get him. Jesus' response is so deadly serious: "I am booked solid; I don't have time to worry about Herod. I have to get to Jerusalem, because that's where prophets always get killed." Jerusalem is like Wall Street or Capitol Hill—synecdoche for a power structure that perpetually rejects and eliminates those who threaten its hegemony, an impersonal system that functions for the benefit of the few and to the detriment of the many. At the same time, Jerusalem, like Wall Street and Capitol Hill, is made up of human beings who love and are loved, and whom God has always wanted to embrace like a mother hen does her chicks, but who were too enmeshed in the system to be able to receive her embrace.

Jerusalem here reminds me of the people of Texas right now. Good, bad, and in between, they all love someone and are loved by someone; they're all precious children of God, *and* they live in a state that made a decision not to participate in the interstate electrical grid but to form its own Electrical Reliability Council. When freezing weather hit, the Texas power industry had made no preparations, because cold weather is rare there, and it would have cost money to prepare the infrastructure for such infrequent events. While Texas officials frantically tried to blame wind turbines, denied responsibility, and, in the case of Senator Ted Cruz, literally left for Cancun, ordinary people huddled in blankets in their cars, some died of hypothermia or from breathing car exhaust, and pipes burst in thousands of homes. Oh Texas,

Texas, Jesus might have said, how often have I longed to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not. Instead, the powerful try to silence the truth-tellers, while the populace bears the consequences of your foolish policies.

There has been this tension in Luke since Mary spoke her Magnificat, about the proud falling from their thrones and being sent away empty—a tension between God’s love for all people, and God’s intention to bring about justice, which is going to mean some people lose their advantage. God loves even Ted Cruz, but God also condemns powerful politicians who abandon their constituents in a time of need to seek their own benefit. Ted Cruz is in an uncomfortable place in this story.

I recently listened to Ezra Klein interview Heather McGhee, past president of Demos and a frequent political commentator. She’s just written a book called *The Sum of Us*, and in this interview she was talking about a thesis of her book. That thesis is that we all do better when we all do better. But American culture teaches a zero-sum kind of outlook, in which if others get benefits, then I lose. Her illustration is the historical fact that many communities filled in their public swimming pools when segregation was outlawed—white people would rather have no community swimming pool at all than have to share it with people of color. And then the private pool industry began to grow, as white people built their own private pools while the poor sweltered. The same thing happened with the social safety net, as people of color began to be able to access it—a narrative took hold that there should be no Medicaid, no OSHA, no worker protections—and the belief behind that narrative was that people of color would use those protections and there wouldn’t be enough for the rest of us. Heather McGhee says, *au contraire*, think about it: why would you get rid of public goods when they clearly benefit all of

us?

Last Tuesday the Iowa Interfaith Alliance held a press conference on Zoom to voice an objection to several pernicious pieces of legislation in the state legislature. There are bills to restrict access to voting, to prevent the teaching of the 1619 Project in our schools, to eliminate the diversity plans for certain school districts and to hinder the ability to protest. Faith leaders from around the state of Iowa spoke about why these bills are so destructive and so counter to the well-being of Iowans. One Presbyterian from the Missouri Valley Presbytery said, “What are you [legislators] *afraid of*? How can it hurt to let people vote, to teach children more about our history?” And she put her finger on it. The Capitol is *afraid* of losing privilege and power if benefits are spread around more equitably. But if Iowans could vote more easily, could protest more safely, could experience our real diversity in our public schools and could learn more about our history, we’d all be better off. *All* of us. Racism, says Heather McGhee, hurts white people too, because it damages the society we live in.

In Heather McGhee and the people on the Interfaith Alliance press conference, I saw people whose lives were bearing fruit. Not gossiping about the latest train wreck like political hobbyists, but seriously and strategically addressing the death-dealing forces in our society. It doesn’t mean they’ll win, God knows, but as Martin Luther King, Jr., said, it’s always the right time to do the right thing. And the thing we all need to remember is that, like that mother hen with the kittens, God works in mysterious ways her wonders to perform. You think repentance will not bear fruit? You think that nothing short of an earthquake could repair the harm that the Iowa Legislature has already done? Nothing that you and I can imagine, maybe. But if God can save two freezing kittens by sending them a chicken, God can use ordinary people like us to

re-jigger the structures that keep the rich rich and the poor poor, that employ racism to reinforce privilege and ignorance and resentment. That hen scarcely knows what she's doing; she's just doing what comes naturally, which is being kind in the context of cruel cold. God will take it from there.

God of Love, God of Peace  
This fractured world  
Cries out in pain  
Burns deep into our souls  
And begs us  
To repent, to make a difference.

Soften the hearts of stone that try to preserve things as they are. Stiffen your children's spines with determined compassion.

Create within us  
A heart for your people  
and lead us to bring about your new day. Amen.