

In our Old Testament lesson God says,  
"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"<sup>1</sup>

Those words were written down about 600 years before the time of Jesus. And yet they apply to what God does in Jesus, what we've been reading about this Lent in the Gospel according to Luke.

As our parish has been engaged in reading through Luke together, we have seen God doing new things in Jesus. One of Luke's overarching themes is God's great reversal, God trying to get us to think a different way, God trying to get us to see things from his divine viewpoint, instead of our human viewpoint.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

We have seen God acting in new ways in Jesus. We saw Jesus begin his ministry with what functioned as his inaugural address. He read from Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>2</sup>

And then he added:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What God had promised through his prophet, God was now doing in his son, in Jesus.

And then we saw Jesus going out and doing these new things: healing the sick, bringing sight to the blind, casting out demons, even raising the dead. And all the while, Jesus was also proclaiming good news, proclaiming the Lord's favor.

And this past week-and-a-half our readings have taken us to a new section of Luke.

At this point, Jesus is setting his face to Jerusalem. Jesus is beginning the long trek that takes up almost 60% of Luke's Gospel. Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, to his passion and his cross. And for the past week-and-a-half, we've seen Jesus heading to Jerusalem. We won't see him arrive until our readings in the latter half of this coming week.

But on the way to Jerusalem, we see Jesus still focused on his mission. And he's still on task. He's still on task in his focus on the cross that lies before him. And he's still on task in healing, opposing the forces of darkness, and proclaiming the ways of God's kingdom, God's great reversal, God's ways and values that are often diametrically opposed to ours.

And one of the big things Jesus is trying to correct in this section of Luke is our picture of God himself. And this correction begins in Jesus' inaugural address. He actually stops quoting from Isaiah in mid-sentence. He ends his reading with the words, "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." He does not include what Isaiah says next:

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 43:18-19

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:18-19

"To proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God."<sup>3</sup>

The day of vengeance of our God. It's interesting that Jesus omits those words.

Because the idea of a vengeful God is present in most religious systems. In fact, I was reading an article a couple weeks ago that looked at religions across societies and through 10,000 years of human history. And they found a fascinating common denominator. It seems that in almost every society throughout history and around the world, that when a group grows to a population of over one-million people, there arises in their society the idea of a moralistic, vengeful god or gods.<sup>4</sup> When a society grows to more than a million people, they develop the idea of a god or gods who will reward obedience and good behavior, and who will punish disobedience or bad behavior.

And believe me, that idea is still out there. It's like the lyric to the old country song:

*God's gonna get 'cha for that  
 God's gonna get 'cha for that  
 There's no place to run and hide  
 For He knows where you're at  
 God's gonna get 'cha for that  
 God's gonna get 'cha for that  
 Every wrong thing that you do  
 God's gonna get 'cha for that*

A couple of decades ago when I was a young priest, I was visiting with an older parishioner. She was a sweet lady who could have been my grandmother. We were talking about her recently discovered cancer. She was struggling with it. And she wanted to know if thought her cancer in the 1990s was God's punishment for an affair she had had way back in the late 1950s.

What this woman was looking for was an explanation. She wanted a simple equation that would make sense of what she was facing in her life.

And I can understand that urge. I have a bachelor's degree in chemistry. I taught high school chemistry and physics for 5 years. Chemistry and physics are all about actions and reactions, about explaining outcomes, predicting outcomes, based upon simple equations.

Do the same kinds of equations which describe our physical universe also describe our spiritual or moral universe? That's what this dear woman was looking for. Cause and effect. An explanation. Even if it was a very tough explanation: God must be punishing me with cancer because of my affair. I did a bad, bad thing back then, and now I'm paying for it. God's gonna get me for that.

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<sup>3</sup> Isa 61.2

<sup>4</sup> *Nature*, "Complex societies precede moralizing gods throughout world history," March 19, 2019

And this is what Jesus really pushes back against in Luke. Jesus is trying to correct a picture of God that's all too common for many people.

We heard this in our Gospel lesson 2 weeks ago which was also our reading this past Tuesday.

Some people ask Jesus about some current events. There have been some recent tragic deaths. So the people ask Jesus the question: What did these people do? What sins did they commit? What's the explanation? Why did God single these particular people out for death?

Apparently, Pontius Pilate massacred some Jews worshipping in the temple.<sup>5</sup> Also, a tower fell over and crushed eighteen other people.<sup>6</sup>

The people want an explanation. Surely bad things don't happen to good people. If something good happens, it must be because God loves you. If something bad happens, it must be because God is mad at you. That's the common view.

So Jesus' reply is rather startling. "Do you think that because these (people) suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all (others)? No I tell you."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus' reply is that these people didn't die because God was out to get them. They weren't worse sinners than anybody else. Instead, Jesus is basically saying, "These things just happen."

Why did these particular people die? Why did it happen? The answer is, because it happened.

After all, we believe that God created us with free will. That goes for everyone, including a despot like Pontius Pilate. If Pilate orders his soldiers to kill a group of people to make a public example of them, then they died because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They didn't die because they were worse sinners than anyone else.

God also created the natural order to obey natural laws. If a tower is flawed, gravity will ultimately pull it down. If people are under it when it falls, it means that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. It doesn't mean that they were any more evil than anyone else.

Jesus is saying that disaster and suffering and death are not to be viewed as punishments from God. The innocent often suffer. And if you want a perfect example of that, we have to look no further than the cross.

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<sup>5</sup> Lk 13:1

<sup>6</sup> Lk 13:4

<sup>7</sup> Lk 13:2

Jesus is going to Jerusalem and his cross. There, the innocent, sinless, lamb of God will an excruciating death by slow torture. Jesus goes to his execution, even though he is innocent of all charges against him.

Because of the cross, we can't take the easy way out of equating suffering with God's punishment. The gospel just won't allow it. Often times the innocent do suffer. Often times, people are just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But Jesus also encourages the people to use this as an opportunity to return to God. The mortality rate is still 100%. So Jesus encourages the people take these tragedies as an opportunity. Use them as a reminder to change your direction. Repent. Make a change in the way you're living your life. Put more of your trust in God. Try God's way of doing things rather than your way of doing things. As long as you're alive, the opportunity is always there to make a change. So, Jesus says, take advantage of the opportunity. Don't put it off.

And don't come to God out of fear. God is not out to get you. God loves you. And in one of the finest portions of Luke, Jesus describes the Father's love for us. It was our reading this past Thursday, and our Gospel lesson last Sunday: the parable of the Prodigal Son.<sup>8</sup>

The younger son behaved abominably. He demanded his share of the inheritance before his father's death, which was a way of saying to his father, "You're as good as dead to me."

Then the son blew his entire bankroll in wild living. But then he decided to return to his father asking his father to treat him like a servant rather than a son, the father ignores that request. Out of his great love, the father celebrates his son's return. The neighbors might expect the father to punish his wayward son. But instead, the father celebrates. He runs out to meet the boy where he is. He embraces him. And he throws him a party.

And for Jesus, this is an image of our Heavenly Father's love for all of us. When we turn to him or return to him, he welcomes us with open arms. God is not looking for an opportunity to punish us. God longs to embrace us.

In the words of our baptismal service, we are asked to put our whole trust in God's grace and love. We are asked, whenever we fall away, to repent and return to God's loving arms.

Not because we afraid of punishment. But because we long for relationship. Because we long to be embraced in his loving arms. Because we want to be his beloved children forever.

"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

God's love for us is tremendous.

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<sup>8</sup> Lk 15:11-52

As our patron saint, St. Paul, says, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children."<sup>9</sup>

In other words, love God, and love others in the way that God loves you.

You are God's beloved children. So imitate your heavenly Father.

Love others in response to God's amazing, tremendous love.

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<sup>9</sup> Eph 5:1