

TURN ASIDE AND BEHOLD:

JOY AND CONVERSION OF LIFE

Reflecting on the lections for the Third Sunday of Lent

with an eye toward the theme of “Cultivating Joy”

Luke 13:1—9

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Let’s read together the text for Sunday’s gospel lesson. And as we read, mark any words or phrases that jump out at your praying imagination. What troubles you? Consoles you? Inspires or repels you?

¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So 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?’⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Before we proceed, I want to share some of my own praying reflections on the content of this reading and the theme at hand today. Let us put ourselves in another time and place to begin.

It is a cold November evening. The city streets outside your home are silent. The chill in the air is accompanied the thick feeling of foreboding. The silence of the empty streets breaks first as clocks throughout ring their peels to mark the 7:00 o’clock hour. Ten minutes later, the silence gives way a second time—not for the benign chime of mechanical clockwork, but for the sound you and your neighbors had been dreading for days: the distant rumble of military aircraft. You hold your breath for a moment. *Perhaps they’re ours*, you hope. But your hope dissolves into the sharp sour taste of adrenaline as the sound of the civil defense siren begins its dreadful wailing. *They’re here*, you think, *God have mercy*.

For the next twelve hours, you and the handful of your neighbors who made it to the safety of the bomb shelter huddle in terror as the night above you booms and the earth around you quivers. When the night passes and you emerge from the bomb shelter, the scene upon which you emerge is one of horror and devastation. A third of your city’s factories lay obliterated. The medieval streets you know so well are hardly recognizable—almost every building destroyed, the sandstone brick of structures that still stand glow red from the heat of incendiary

bombs. And the building you perhaps hoped might have been spared—your town's fourteenth century cathedral, stands as but a shell of itself as the remaining wooden elements of its construction burn away.

Such is the scene that would have met the residents of the town of Coventry in England on the morning of 15 November, 1940. The night before, the Luftwaffe had littered this industrial center in the heart of England with hundreds of tons of explosives and incendiary bombs. Hitler's goal had been to cripple England's aviation production and chip away at the morale of the civilian population. The bombing lasted for 13 hours, spending, in total, some 30,000 incendiaries along with 500 tons of high explosive bombs. In one night, more than 4,300 homes in Coventry were destroyed and around two-thirds of the city's buildings were damaged. 568 people lost their lives in the chaos.

Today, adjacent the bombed-out ruins of Coventry Cathedral's fourteenth century footprint stands the twentieth century Cathedral. Although consecrated in 1969, plans for the cathedral's rebuilding began the day after her destruction—not as an act of defiance, but rather as a demonstration of hope. Hope that a day would dawn when such violent conflict would be unimaginable. As a part of Bishop Walter Hussey's aim to renew the arts in the Church of England, the new cathedral nave features exquisitely colorful abstract stained glass windows.

Yet as one enters the new cathedral, this glorious sea of color is not immediately apparent. Indeed, if one simply stands at the liturgical west facing the high altar but advances no further, there is almost no indication that the building has any stained glass in the nave at all. We

have to move our perspective in order to detect this particular beauty. If we make the journey to the high altar and turn around, only then does the building seem to fall into place—for this beatific vision in glass is only visible from the liturgical east end, looking west.

I don't think it is any accident that this particular aspect of this sacred space requires a definite turning. The act of turning aside from the paths we think we know is a theme that runs right through every invitation of the spiritual life, and Lent is a perfect season in which to practice this subtle but life changing posture.

When Moses first encounters God in the resplendent flames of the burning bush, he has to turn aside from the path he had chosen for himself that day.

*Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight.'*¹

“I must turn aside and look at this great sight,” says Moses. We hear a distant echo of these words in this morning's gospel, but we might miss what the author of Luke is inviting us to do—especially if we carry the kinds of baggage I know I certainly do around the word “repent.” In my own experience, this baggage—no, let's be real, it is more like freight—this freight convinces me that repentance is something dreadful and scary. There are historical reasons for this, to be sure, and the church

¹ Exodus 3:1—3 NRSV.

has had her own part to play in the ways we sometimes incorrectly receive Jesus' call to repent.

But the word used here by the author of Luke—μετανοiete (metanoiete)—is a surprisingly light word; it does not drag the kinds of freight with which my own fears so often burden it. *Metanoiete* means, very simply, *change your mind*. Or, we might even say, *consider things from a different perspective*.²

Before we do anything else—before we act or try to amend our lives—we need to try to see things from a different perspective. This is precisely what Jesus invites from his audience in this seemingly cryptic passage from Luke.

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'*³

His hearers have come to him with their own concerns and fears brought on by a reality of this world that the residents of Coventry knew; a reality that we, too, know. Terrible things happen—towers collapse and crush people, rulers intimidate and murder, the powers and principalities of this world attempt to lighten the darkness of life

² Or, as Terry Holms has named it, "God's gift of space to turn around in."

³ Luke 13:1—5 NRSV.

with the flames of their own powers. But these flames only consume and destroy, for we “have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.” Where is there any joy to behold in such a world? When presented with an opportunity to explain the problem of theodicy—of why bad things happen to innocent people—Jesus doesn’t follow through and provide a cut and dry answer for us. *Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.*

Joy cannot, I believe, mean the same thing as “happiness.” In this world of falling towers and clashing brutalities, happiness is altogether too fragile, too contingent a thing. Joy must be, therefore, something more durable—something that can bear the heights of elation and the depths of sorrow. And so I invite you to pray with those parts of your own experience where I change of perspective has brought a new radiance—a new joy—to otherwise dark and dreadful things. Where have you heard the spirit bid you “turn aside, turn around,” so that you might behold the glow and vivid colors of stained glass you hadn’t seen before? Or to encounter a new kind of light emanating from the flames of a fire that doesn’t consume the creatures of creation, but rather makes them more resplendently what they are?

Holy Spirit, inspire us with your holy and immortal fire, and grant us grace to change our minds and put on a new perspective, that we may more fully behold the radiance of God’s mercy and charity in all we encounter or experience. Only then can we amend our ways. Only then, by your power, can we be helped, can we be saved.

Amen.