

Sermon – Luke 13:-1-9  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
3 Lent – Year C  
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“Hints and Allegations”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It's not often that I hear the voice of God so clearly. Then again, it's not often that the voice of God sounds so familiar. This weekend, our confirmation students were on a retreat at Lutherdale, a Lutheran camp in southern Wisconsin. We were learning about spiritual practices, including gratitude, prayers, and community. During Saturday morning chapel, one of our confirmands, Mae, was part of the skit that served as the sermon for worship. In response to someone who kept protesting that they just didn't have time to pray, whose life – including their religious life – was too busy, Mae's voice, God's voice was clear. There's no special time, no magic formula, no right words to say, or wrong words, for that matter. God simply wants to draw near to you, at all times and in all things. It may feel like we're just talking into the air, but as the skit made clear, God isn't just air. God is really there.
2. Why, then, do we go to such lengths to keep God at a manageable distance? Why do we try to keep God just small enough to control on our terms? Why, we might well ask, is our image of God such that when disaster and tragedy strike, we are left with little more than our “whys”? Why me? Why this? Why now? These are the questions that swirl in the background of the conversation between Jesus and those gathered around him today.
3. The conversation centers, at first, around certain Galileans who were brutally murdered by Pilate, the Roman governor who had no problem using violence

and murder to keep the so-called peace. The historian Josephus records at least five incidents to which Jesus could be referring; whether it's one of those five or another one altogether, there is no shortage of such brutal moments in the Roman rule of Judea. Pilate, responding perhaps to a protest, has his troops murder a number of Galileans and, to add insult to injury, mingles their blood in with the animals used for sacrifice. Instead of focusing on Pilate here, however, Jesus picks up on another undercurrent of the conversation, that these victims must have done something to deserve this fate. In the same vein, he wonders aloud about a different tragedy, this one less political and more random. Apparently, a tower has collapsed, killing eighteen people. Jesus asks, were these more sinful than others? Did they get what they had coming? Did God, one wonders, topple the tower upon them in retribution for their sin?

4. Such theological wonderings seem odd to us. I don't think most of us imagine God as a petty divinity who zaps people for being bad. On the other hand, who among us, in the face of tragedy and disaster, hasn't wondered why, hasn't cried aloud to God, "Why has this happened to me?" Jesus' answers here make a few things clear. First, God isn't handing out punishment for sin, and thank goodness, for if we had this kind of god on our hands, who wouldn't be in imminent danger of retribution? You think they were bad? Wait until it's your turn! Second, if we only focus on the sin *out there*, our quest for righteousness all too easily becomes smug self-righteousness. And third, we don't have such a small, distant God on our hands. The people imagine God as being far off, concerned with keeping score. Such a God is frightening, perhaps, but also manageable. After all, if we can figure out when and how God will punish people, we can also maintain control over our own destinies. But God, Jesus tells us, is both less involved and so much more involved than we imagine. God is not, Jesus tells us, in the business of toppling towers and using dictators to deal out death. Those things happen because we live in a broken, sinful world. Sometimes bad people do horrible

- things to innocent people. Sometimes bad things just happen. God, Jesus tells us, is not the cause. God, rather, provides salvation in the midst of suffering and evil. God gets the divine hands dirty in the muck and manure, coaxing new life where we see only barrenness and death.
5. Jesus is calling us into a different understanding of God, one that opens us up to a God who isn't air but is really there. A God that calls us into a new relationship with our neighbors. If God is a smallminded tyrant who is committed to punishing *those* people, then the best thing to do is keep both God and those other people at arm's length. And there's no shortage of voices who would seek to separate us from our neighbors, those who look different, or believe differently, than we do; those come from somewhere else; those whose presence makes us uncomfortable. If we keep them and their problems over there, we might just get by. But is that the sort of world God created? Is this the God we worship? Henri Nouwen writes, "Real loneliness comes when we have lost all sense of having things in common." Nouwen reminds us that we are meant to live in close community with God and neighbor. Living in the beloved community God intends, the proper response to suffering is neither to blame nor to keep distant. It is, rather, to do what Jesus does. To get our hands dirty in this world for the sake of life.
  6. This past week marked what would have been the 97<sup>th</sup> birthday of one of the most influential theologians in my childhood, Mister Rogers. And as he reminded children of all ages, in words you know, when disaster strikes and the news is scary, we find hope by looking for the helpers. As his mother reminded him, "You will always find people who are helping." Perhaps we are called to be these helpers. And while I didn't learn Greek from Mister Rogers, I know enough to point out that when the Apostle Paul writes that "you will not be tested beyond your strength," he isn't talking to you. He's talking to y'all. The "you" here is plural. We were never meant to get through life, through all of this, on our own. We get through it together. And not

merely because we're stronger together, but because together we are who God says we are, the very Body of Christ that lives for the sake of the world.

7. Lent is a time for honesty, friends. To remember that whatever sin those people are guilty of, it is our own sin we are called to confess. And to remember that, in the confessing, we find that our sin is already forgiven. The fig tree is given more time. But even if it needs to be cut down, it is only to make room for new growth. Even now, the Tree of Life that is the cross of Christ emerges from what seemed a barren stump. God is not far off but bears fruit in your living. Repent, therefore, turning to the God who is here and the neighbors whose needs cry out for your love, your help, your kindness, your passion for justice. Repent, bearing witness to Christ and bearing fruit for the world. Repent, and draw near to the God who is as close to you as your own breath, whose voice is surprisingly familiar, who calls you to live for each other. We may not always receive answers to our "whys," but we find an answer to a different question: Who? Well, Jesus Christ, that's who; the crucified and risen Lord in whom we find life. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.