

Feasting and Fasting
Third Sunday of Lent
February 28, 2016
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Text: Isaiah 55/Luke 13

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Luke 13

First a brief editorial comment on the Epistle lesson that Pastor Jill just read from 1st Corinthians. I'll be focusing in the sermon on the Gospel and Old Testament lessons, and there will be some issues raised in the Gospel lesson about human suffering, and if you're paying attention you might notice that what I say about it might seem to be in contradiction to the Corinthians reading we just heard. Now one sermon can only do so much, so I'm not going to seek to resolve that tension today, but I have thought about it so if you want to talk to me about it, I'd be glad to do so – so that's just for you keeping score in the pews.

Now about the Gospel lesson – it's interesting that last week in Luke we heard about the Roman ruler Herod and Jesus responds to a threat from him; and now as we go back a few verses in Luke, we hear about another Roman ruler, Pilate. And both Herod and Pilate will figure into the passion story of Jesus ahead. Here the story is of brutality that Pilate inflicts on some Jewish citizens of Galilee – the region in fact where Jesus is from – as apparently some pilgrims coming to the temple in Jerusalem are killed by Pilate – just as Jesus will be making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. So there are many different threads of stories and levels of meaning that are being woven together here.

I've got good news and bad news, which do you want to hear first? – you know how that goes, right? – there are lots of good news, bad news jokes – I googled it and even found the specialized category of good news/bad news jokes for pastors! Such as...

The good news is Mr. Phillips found a cure for his insomnia -

the bad news is that the cure involves listening to your sermons.

The good news is worship attendance has increased dramatically the past few weeks -

the bad news is that you've been on vacation.

The good news is that when you were sick the women's circle sent you a get-well card –

the bad news is the vote to send it was 10-9.

And then there's just a classic good news/bad news joke for everyone - a doctor calls and tells her patient: 'I have good news and bad news – the good news is that you have 24 hours to live'; 'what?!', the patient asks, 'well if that's the good news then what's the bad news?' 'the bad news is I forgot to call you yesterday...!'

Alright, well other than an excuse for some corny jokes, I want to get us thinking about good news/bad news as a way of listening to the scripture passages today. I suppose the good news/bad news idea expresses a sort of wry wisdom about life: don't get too comfortable with any good news, because some bad news may be lurking just ahead. And I suppose it's also a way to get our attention – perhaps we're more prepared for bad news if we have some good to start with. I don't know if good news/bad news was an idiom in Jesus' day, but from my read of what is happening in Luke, Jesus seems to capture the spirit of it - it's no joke, but it is a way to get people's attention and to get across something Jesus wants people to hear.

How things go in Luke 13 is that news comes to Jesus about people who have been killed by the Roman governor Pilate in the Jewish temple. And what is so interesting is that in this news brought to him, Jesus doesn't see this just as a tragic report, Jesus hears an issue being raised: "Do you think these Galileans who suffered were worse than other Galileans?" Jesus asks. Which is a question about God, actually: did these people die as a punishment from God for their sins? A question about human suffering and divine action: is our suffering an expression of God's action?

NO! -Jesus says, I tell you, NO

And just to be clear, Jesus brings up another recent incident: ‘those 18 killed in the tower collapse at Siloam – were they worse sinners than the rest of Jerusalem?’

NO! -Jesus says, I tell you, NO

That’s good news! Jesus teaches that there is not some direct link between suffering and sin; there is not a divine scale that balances out human misfortune with divine judgment. Too often religion seeks to impose neat equations of suffering and punishment on human experience, and there has been great damage done to people’s faith and souls in doing so, compounding suffering with guilt and fear and shame – Jesus says: NO. God is not the divine assassin, picking off sinners - inflicting suffering to prove a point. That’s the good news.

But there’s some bad news too. An intriguing part of this passage is that Jesus not only hears a question about God in what is reported to him, he also hears something the people are saying about themselves: Jesus hears a desire in these people to believe that they are better than those who have suffered and died; a desire to say that God was against those people, but God is on our side. I said that it is good news that the answer Jesus gives first is ‘NO’ – but it leads pretty quickly to some bad news, which is this: YOU are the ones in danger of judgment – unless you repent, you will all perish as they did...; Jesus says - twice.

The good news is that God is not going around inflicting suffering on people; the bad news is that unless you turn to God, you’re all going to hell! – now THAT is some bad news! I want you to know that I use that word ‘hell’ not in order to be crass, but to express that Jesus is talking about serious business here – Jesus is trying to make clear the path of destruction we humans can pave for ourselves – ‘you will perish’ he says. What Jesus sees happening is people looking around trying to figure out who is good and who is bad – trying to determine who is God punishing and who is God blessing? who are God’s enemies and who are God’s friends? -how can we make sure that God is on our side, and then it’s all OK. NO! Jesus says – I tell you, NO – the truth is that unless you recognize your own need turn to God, the ways of

death and sin will have their way; that unless this world recognizes the need to turn to the ways of God, death and sin will reign.

That's the bad news...or is it good news? Because just when Jesus has told everyone they are on the path to destruction, he tells this little parable about the fig tree: it's a fig tree that hasn't been making any figs, but the gardener convinces the master to give it some more time to bear fruit – even gives it some manure to help! This is good news! – God does not give up on us! – even gives spiritual manure to make us fruitful! – good news!...or is this bad news? The parable concludes: 'OK, but if there's still no fruit, cut it down.' Not the cheery ending we're looking for.

Good news? Bad news? – it's hard to keep track of in what Jesus says, and perhaps that's just what Jesus is after. As I was reflecting on the theme of this Third Lenten Sunday – feasting and fasting- it occurred to me that it offers a different paradigm for our lives: instead of a good news/bad news view of life which puts us in a tit for tat with God and with one another, we are invited to come to life in a different way: with gratitude and humility. Grateful for the feast of blessings experienced in life, while also humble about our own limitations and brokenness. Feasting hearts open to the richness of life, and fasting hearts always seeking to repent – to be turned to God's way of life – that is what I hear from Jesus. In the current climate of religion and politics and culture, I have some extensive reports that I would like to bring to Jesus on who is deserving of God's punishment and who Jesus should be put in their place – about who is good news and who is bad news. But Jesus has a surprising response: "repent" – YOU repent - YOU turn to God! - life is too short for keeping track of the good and bad sides, for riding the waves of good news and bad news – in this life there is only time to be fruitful, to be faithful, to trust that God's kingdom is the true home in which we abide. Which is in fact the kingdom of feasting and fasting that Isaiah describes – did you hear? – 'come to the waters; come and eat; come and have life' - AND also: 'turn from unrighteousness; return to the Lord' – gratitude and humility that turns us again and again from death and to life.

Good news – bad news...we hear a lot of both in our world; we have known a lot of both in our lives. But I don't think that is where we find God. Jesus shocks us out of that framework, and insists we find God in turning to God, always, no matter the circumstance – and as we hear that call from Jesus to turn, we realize that it is God who has turned first to us – it is the God of life who holds our lives and our world. Jesus' words shocks us: YOU repent! - and Isaiah turns that call into a vision that is played out in our midst today. As we come this day with our own good news and bad news – our own questions and sorrows, our own hunger and thirst for healing and hope, our own needs to turn from death to life, God calls us to the waters, to the bread, to the wine, to the blessing of that which truly satisfies. In a world that knows too well the paths that lead to perishing, we are nourished as witnesses to a different way: turn to God! – that is the fruitful path, the path of life; turn to God! - and find God already there: for God's mercy is our true home.

AMEN.