

13 Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. 2 He replied, "Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. 4 What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did."

6 Jesus told this parable: "A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 He said to his gardener, 'Look, I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I've never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil's nutrients?' 8 The gardener responded, 'Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. 9 Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.'"

31 At that time, some Pharisees approached Jesus and said, "Go! Get away from here, because Herod wants to kill you."

32 Jesus said to them, "Go, tell that fox, 'Look, I'm throwing out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will complete my work. 33 However, it's necessary for me to travel today, tomorrow, and the next day because it's impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'"

34 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want that. 35 Look, your house is abandoned. I tell you, you won't see me until the time comes when you say, Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name."

-Common English Bible

An unspecified number of Galileans killed while offering sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. 18 Judeans killed when a tower fell on them. 26 killed when a gunman opened fire in a worship service in Sutherland Springs, Texas. 6 dead in a mass shooting in a mosque in Quebec. 11 dead, when a gunman opened fire in a synagogue in Pittsburgh. 49 dead in a shooting at an Orlando night club. 60 dead in a mass shooting in Las Vegas. 14 dead in west coast fires in 2020. 80 people dead in Texas in the wake of the most recent winter storm. 507,000 dead in the USA in less than a year of grappling with COVID-19. It's staggering. These death counts, whether small or large, deaths that seem so unnecessary, so wrong, so tragic. Sometimes the numbers don't touch us. We can forget that behind each of these numbers is a person— with a web of relationships,

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an ocean of grief. This is the value of memorials— the Vietnam Memorial, for example, takes the number 58,000 and shows all the names... and people that visit leave evidence of all the grief. As uncomfortable as this is, because our Gospel reading gives us death counts early on, and because we reached the gruesome milestone of half a million deaths to COVID this week... it seemed important for us to sit with this for a moment. *When you sit with the accounting of tragic deaths, what do you learn about yourself? How does it influence your answer to the question, “Who am I?” Fragile, vulnerable, finite, mortal, scared, lucky, blessed... something else?*

Jesus seemed to intuit that those who brought the horrific news of Pilate having worshippers killed might have been thinking that somehow these Galilean victims deserved it... somehow they were worse sinners than others. Maybe sometimes we make sense of tragedy in this way... historically, people have. But Jesus says, no. He doesn't deny that they are sinners. But he doesn't suspect them to be any worse sinners than anyone else. The same is true for those killed by the natural evil of a falling tower. Sinners, yes, but not worse sinners. Everyone is a sinner. Jesus seems to assume this. I share this assumption as well. There are two things that seem universally true about human beings— everyone dies. And everyone sins. By sin I don't mean necessarily discrete acts of wrong doing— though all do these from time to time. I mean an overall condition into which we're born, a system over which we are powerless, that distorts our relationship with God, neighbor, and self, that disorders our love, that leads us all to fall short of the glory of God. Even those of us who are deeply faithful, trying our best, loving as well as we possibly can— none of us is perfect. All of us have room for growth and change. *Can you admit this about yourself? Does this inspire your answer to the question, “Who am I?”*

In light of both of these tragedies Jesus says, “Unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.” I wrestled with this. We're all going to die. This is the human condition. We are mostly powerless over when or how we will die. Hopefully, most of us will not die violently nor in tragic accidents. I don't think that all those who do die violently or tragically are necessarily unrepentant, horrific sinners. I can't go there. I won't go there. I lost a friend to COVID. She was one of the best people

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I know. She was also a sinner. So am I. So what does Jesus mean? What does it mean to die just as they did if we don't change our hearts and lives? I wonder if part of the change that Jesus invites is an embrace of life, and a readiness for death. This does not mean a death wish. This means living fully every day, in such a way that we are not accumulating regrets and resentments and estrangements, but instead embracing the gift of life and the gift of neighbors and the gift of God's love, cleaning up our side of the street, nurturing our relationships, loving God, neighbor, and self, so that when we die, however we die, we die at peace, those who love us knowing we lived well. There do seem to be different ways of dying, with greater or lesser peace and acceptance. *Let's ask again, "Who am I?" What changes to heart and life do I require to be fully alive, and ready to die?*

Jesus tells a story to help encourage the change he invites. It's a story about a fig tree that has been unproductive for three years. The owner of the fig tree is fed up and is ready to chop it down, but the gardener pleads for another year, promises some extra acts of care and attention, wants to give the tree some more time, and some more nurture. It's a story that invites listeners to imagine ourselves as fig trees... to inquire whether our lives are bearing fruit... and to note that we are given time to do so... not infinite time, but time. Time in which God in Christ, by the Spirit, nurtures us... encourages our growth and fruitfulness. I am amazed at what can come with time and the Spirit's nurture. *And again we ask, "Who am I?" Am I bearing fruit? Am I letting myself be nurtured?*

That last question is a big one. When Jesus laments over Jerusalem in the last portion of our reading today, he indicates that he wanted to gather God's people like a mother hen gathers her chicks. This is a tender image, a nurturing image... we worship a God who wants to gently gather us in, to nourish us, and nurture us... to help us to grow, and change, and thrive... Jesus says that the people of Jerusalem, the center of power in his nation, did not want this. Sometimes, I think... we don't want it either. We don't think we deserve it. Or we can't imagine God as anything other than ruthless or wrathful. Or we're so attached to death dealing ways of being in this world, so caught up in the powers that be, so trapped in privilege or addiction... that we don't think we

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need it. We turn our backs to the gardener, the mother hen... But Jesus, God incarnate, says he wants it, he wants to nurture and nourish us so that we will thrive. Jesus knows that he is heading to his death in Jerusalem and yet he is devoted to healing and throwing out demons, to rooting out that which is life destroying, to nurturing growth through care and teaching... he isn't distracted by the threat to his own life. He is living fully every day that he's got. And he is showing us just how fruitful a human life can be, even a human life that ends in tragedy. *Can we give our hearts to this revelation of God? Can we truly believe that one answer to the question, "Who am I?," truly is, a beloved child of God, nurtured and nourished by God?*

It's all true, friends. The hard and scary answers, and the beautiful answers too. *What feels most true for you **today**? How do you answer the question, "Who am I?"* Take some time now to write your answer on a name tag or piece of paper.