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The Message: The God of Second Chances

"The God of Second Chances"

Sometimes, it seems the world is so foreign to us. And we ask ourselves, 'How do we make sense of what is happening in the world?'

We long to make sense of senseless tragedies and search for reasons even when there are none.

Jesus anticipated our questions in today's gospel reading. He notices that people are good at predicting the weather from the signs in the skies, but don't read their own times very well.

A terrible tragedy had happened in Jerusalem. In the temple, Pilate, the Roman governor, had killed some Galileans who were making sacrifices at the temple and then he mixed their blood with the sacrifices. No doubt this was a warning to other Jews to remember that Rome was in charge.

When people ask him what it means, Jesus mentions another incident: a tower fell on people near the pool of Siloam killing 18 people who simply happened to be there.

What are we to make of this? What are we to make of senseless tragedy? the suffering of the innocent? Is it deserved? Was Pilate God's instrument of judgement?

He asks them if they really believe that the people who died were worse sinners than they were. 'No,' he answers himself. He warns them that they too will perish if they don't recognize their own sin and ask for forgiveness.

Jesus is telling them to turn their attention toward their own lives--don't speculate about others. What about your life? What about mine? We can spend so much time trying to explain things--so much time worrying about other people's lives that we forget to pay attention to our own relationship with God. 'Let these senseless deaths awaken you,' says Jesus.

When I was teaching, a colleague was caught having inappropriate relationships with students. I was asked to make the announcement. The students surprised me with their questions.

What kind of punishment would he have?

What kind of counselling would he have?

I reminded them that they were preparing to be ministers who might find themselves in situations where they could be tempted, and they should be asking themselves, "how can I prepare myself to minister in a way that will protect me and others from the possibility of inappropriate behaviour?"

We often look to assign blame, figure out the lives of others. Jesus is pointing us back to an examination of our own lives.

Jesus could leave things there. But then he tells a story about a fig tree that doesn't bloom or bear fruit. The owner wants it cut down

That would have been a fitting ending to the story of the fig tree, and a pointed allegory for all of us to shape up and get right with God. But Jesus has a different ending; there's urgency and hope in the gardener's voice. "Give me a year. I'm not willing to give up on this tree. Let me dig around it, loosen the hard soil, and fertilize it."

A second chance!

God is like that gardener, Jesus says. Waiting patiently for people to turn their lives, their hearts toward God. God is patient and gives everyone a chance. God's grace is greater than God's judgment. Accidents and disasters are not to be taken as signs that God is vengeful, but the events of life are a constant call to examine our own lives, and give thanks for all the second chances God does give us.

Reading the the signs of the times means looking at ourselves in the context of God's grace. Jesus' image of the gardener fertilizing and digging around the fig tree is an immensely reassuring one for us. In this Lenten season, as we look for signs of coming to new life in the soil, we can also be grateful for the new life God promises us in the second chance.