

Lent 3
Year C
Luke 13:1-9

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Those gathered around Jesus are seeking an answer to the age old question of why is there human suffering.

In the ancient world it was common for people to think that if someone experienced a tragedy it was the result of some wrong the person had done or was evidence of some sin that they were involved in.

The reasoning was that God meted out both reward and punishment.

The concern among the people was, how did you know whether you were going to end up in the reward group as opposed to the punishment group?

The crowd recounts a recent attack by Pontus Pilate on some Galileans in which they were killed in a rather ghastly manner.

The crowd's unstated anxiety is Why?

Did these Galileans deserve such treatment?

Surely, living a blameless life
should place you firmly in the reward camp
seems to be the unspoken question.

The crowd is unsure yet hopeful Jesus will have the answer.

But in their faltering attempt
to have Jesus confirm their theory,
or really their hope,
they fail to illicit the response they wish to hear.

Instead, Jesus recounts a second tragic incident
in which 18 were killed by a falling tower.
A seemingly random accident
but the crowd clearly wants reassurance
from Jesus that this is not the case.

You can feel the crowd's unspoken plea for assurance.

You can hear their unspoken attempts
to rationalize.

Surely, they seem to ask,
these 18 unfortunate Jerusalemites
somehow brought this disaster upon themselves.

But the response they receive cuts right to the heart.

In fact, Jesus continues, they are just like you.

The very same can happen to you.

Was the crowd filled with horror and despair?

Did they stare, slack mouthed,
at the One who has performed miracles in their midst?

The One who drove out the demon,
that filled the nets with fish,
cured the leper, and healed the paralytic?

Where was the Good News
in Jesus' statement that
they were just as vulnerable
as those who had suffered such horrific outcomes?

But then Jesus continues:

Now is the time he urges,
to take a look at your life.

To repent.

None of us knows the day or time when we too will pass from this life.

So, he challenges: How are you living your life?

The moment is now He confronts them and us.

Now, right now, repent.

It is important to note, that when Jesus
challenges those gathered to repent,
He does not mean a complete change in lifestyle
or adherence to a superior moral uprightness.

But rather, a more accurate interpretation
of repentance is a changed mind,
a new way of seeing things
resulting in being able to adopt a different perspective.

Such as, no one's actions, lifestyle,
or family tree are the cause of God
meting out suffering or tragedy.

Ever.

We've all heard elusions,
or direct statements,
laying the blame for various tragedies
on the backs of any number of groups of people
for what some believe to be sinful living.

Jesus abolishes this theory without reservation.

No one is protected
from the possibility of suffering or tragedy
no matter their wealth,
or lack thereof,
the color of their skin, their lifestyle choices,
or the acts of members of their family.

So what are we to do in response to Jesus' call to repentance?

How might we live our lives
in ways that acknowledge that no person
created by God is meant to be exposed
to suffering based on their wealth, lifestyle, or skin color?

We have only to walk two blocks to the north
and take a left on Park Ave for a few blocks
to see the vulnerability of our neighbors
who live in insufferable conditions on our streets
without the basic life necessity of safe and secure shelter.

In January 2015, the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative
conducted an annual survey that found 6,130 homeless men, women and children
in Denver and the surrounding six counties.
Of this number, Denver City and County counted 3,737 men, women, and children.

A recent study conducted by students at DU law school reveals that

Six cities — Denver, Boulder, Colorado Springs, Durango,
Fort Collins and Grand Junction —
spent a combined \$5 million
from 2010 through 2014,
enforcing laws that criminalize acts such as
lying down or camping in public spaces throughout the state.

Although Denver has 11 ordinances on the books that, according to the study, disproportionately target the homeless, \$750,000 spent in 2014 was linked to only five of the 11.

Surely, we can find a better to way to provide our neighbors with the basic human right to shelter.

A bill introduced in the state House this month would have created a bill of rights for homeless people.

The [Right to Rest Act](#), died before the House Local Government Committee last Wednesday.

The Act would have allowed the homeless to sleep in automobiles, parks or other public spaces. Similar legislation died in committee last year as well.

I wonder, are we called to engage and collaborate with our neighbors in finding an economic and humane response to alleviate the suffering of our brothers and sisters who are denied safe secure shelter?

How can we show forth our desire to repent and enter into a new way of seeing the struggles of those without shelter?

Likewise, how might we be called to engage in racial reconciliation in Denver and beyond?

I don't how many of you might have seen the RMPBS show that aired in the past couple of weeks which revealed the disparities experienced by African American women regarding infant mortality.

Honestly, I consider myself to be fairly well read and yet the statistics revealed in the Colorado public health figures completely shocked me.

The records reveal that an African American middle income woman, earning up to \$75,000 a year, has a 14.9% chance of losing a child within the first year while a middle income Caucasian woman's risk lies at 3.7%.

So regardless of education and income, black women are still 4 times more likely to lose a child in their first year.

A black middle class woman has more than twice the risk of Caucasian women living below the poverty level whose risk is 7.1%.

To be sure, there are obviously socio-economic factors which contribute to all infant mortality rates such as poverty, lack of education, lack of access to adequate healthcare and so on.

But the shock to me is that black women who appear to be succeeding in areas of education, income, and access to healthcare, are still experiencing a much greater risk of losing a child in the first year.

And by the way, these statistics for Colorado are right on track with the national statistics.

So researchers here in Colorado are studying the levels of stress in the lives of black women at all levels of income and education.

What they have discovered is that the stress experienced by black women takes its toll in the form of much higher rates of infant mortality, heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and other medical conditions.

These researchers are studying the presence of a cortisol in the blood, saliva and hair of black women.

Cortisol found in blood and saliva samples will reveal evidence of more recent stress whereas the cortisol found in hair samples can be measured throughout a strand of hair to determine stress levels over a longer period of time.

What the research shows is that black women, regardless of income and education, experience stress in their lives at a much higher rate than Caucasian women.

For black women, they often experience stress in the form of security, access to jobs and housing, their children's security, their ability to provide for themselves and their children.

Many of you, I'm sure, have heard of the studies which reflect that resumes and applications which bear names deemed by some to have "black sounding" names are less likely to receive a response for job or college interviews.

Additionally, loan and mortgage applications which contain "black sounding" names are less likely to be approved.

It's important to note, that in both of these studies, the resumes and applications contained the same information as one submitted with a Caucasian sounding name.

The result of this long term exposure
to high levels of stress results
in the increase of serious medical conditions
for black women such as heart disease,
diabetes, high blood pressure, and infant mortality.

Their daily lives are populated with stresses
that are hidden to many of us and
that put their very lives at risk.

And worse, the lives of their children.

This is the norm here in Denver and across our country.

I have to tell you, I heard these statistics and was shocked.

This truly sounds to me
like something I would hear
about a developing country
not about our city, state, and country.

Repent, Jesus cries, repent.

I wonder, how can we change our minds
and engage a new way of seeing things?

How best can we open our hearts and minds
so that we are able to adopt a different perspective?

I wonder, are we willing to repent?