

“Hey there, all who are thirsty, come to the waters! Are you penniless? Come anyway – buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money – everything’s free!” In our first reading today, the prophet Isaiah speaks these words to the people of Israel as they experience **chasmic** dislocation, sorrow, desolation, grief, emptiness, and **enormous loss**, as they ask the often-unanswerable question, “Why?” The people are in exile, in Babylon. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem had been burned and the temple destroyed. The king was exiled, the leading citizens were deported, and the life they had known all had come to an end. It is into this context that Isaiah speaks words of consolation and hope saying, “Hey there, all who are thirsty, come to the waters!” Imagine hearing these words, “come, buy and eat, even though **you have no money, it is free.**” The prophet addresses the void, the emptiness, the nothingness compared to what once was. He addresses the **dislocation** and the **sorrow** in the lives of the people. As he does this, he uses the metaphor of food to remind them of the covenant that God had established and renewed. Isaiah likens God’s faithful, everlasting covenant to food freely given, as he says, “Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good.... come to me, listen, so that you may live.” Isaiah is proclaiming a promise of **hope** to those in

exile, a promise the God of Israel made to the descendants of David, a promise that applies to **all** nations and **all** people. God, whose mercy is beyond understanding, welcomes everyone who turns around and turns back to God, everyone who comes to enjoy the feast of forgiveness, grace, tenacious mercy, and love.

As I hear these words, I must say they touch the deepest places of my being when I think about the people of Ukraine. I realize this very God is right now faithfully present to the people in Ukraine, even though they may not feel it. **They** are experiencing **chasmic** dislocation, sorrow, desolation, grief, and **enormous loss**. The cry from the depth of their hearts is, “Why? Why, Lord, why?” The only thing that gives me hope right now is knowing that this gracious God in whom we trust is present to them as they live with such horror and grief. This gracious God is present to those seeking refuge, and present to the people welcoming those who seek refuge. This God of love is present to all of us, holding us in love, even as millions of people are experiencing dislocation, grief, and emptiness. And this God of love is calling **us** to be God’s hands and feet as we work to do **whatever** we can to address the senseless violence and tragedy and try to somehow make a difference in people’s lives.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is out preaching and teaching on his way to Jerusalem when some from the crowd ask him to comment on what to us is an obscure historical reference but what at the time must have been the latest news of violence and tragedy. It seems Pilate recently had a group of Galileans killed as they were making sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. As far as we're told, these were just some pilgrims who had come from lowly Galilee to the Holy City to make their sacrifices. Now, we are not told why Pilate had these pilgrims killed. However, that may be because with Rome, "reasons" for violence and intimidation weren't always necessary.

We also do not know just why they came and told Jesus about this tragedy. It could simply have been because that's just what we do when tragedies happen or when violence strikes. We talk about it and ask, "Why?"

*Why are the Russians attacking civilians in Ukraine?
Why are they bombing hospitals, schools, and children?*

And the questions behind these questions are always bigger and more universal:

*Why do bad things happen?
Why does violence and evil always seem to win?*

No doubt **these** were the questions behind the questions the people asked of Jesus regarding this event – unanswered questions we know very well and ask this very day. But from the way Jesus responds, we can guess there might have been **more** going on here as he was asked this question. Jesus asks them, *“Do you think these Galileans got what they deserved?”* You see, Galilee was a rural region to the North of Jerusalem, viewed in those days as backwards and bumpkin by the people from the big city. Not only that, but the Galileans also had a reputation for being wild and rebellious, always getting in trouble with Rome, making life more difficult for everyone. To put it plainly, the Galileans were embarrassing and thought of as something like second-class Jews. So, Jesus addresses that skewed perspective and asks, *“Do you think these Galileans got what was coming to them?”* And he then asks them about another tragedy now lost to history, one that seems to have happened in their **own** backyard. He asks, *“What about the 18 who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell in **Jerusalem** – do you think **they** were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? Did they get what they deserved?”*

It’s not just the age-old question of why tragedy happens that Jesus is addressing here, but the equally old impulse to wonder if somehow, someday, people get what they deserve, be it good or bad. Jesus

addresses the flawed idea that suffering – be it our own or the suffering of others – must be a result of some mistake on the part of the victim, some infraction, some transgression, and God is simply settling the score.

We know this isn't true. The truth is our bad decisions often come with consequences. However, we also know that not all suffering can be explained through cause and effect. A lifelong smoker who receives a lung cancer diagnosis is one thing, but what of all the kids in the cancer wards of children's hospitals? Bad things just sometimes happen! God does not create and impose suffering upon the people God so dearly loves. God does NOT cause suffering!

Anyway, Jesus has more to say about the suffering of the innocent in other places, but here he drills in on the bigger issue, the deeper truth as he sees it. He simply tells them, "*Repent. Turn around. Turn back to God.*" In essence, it is as though he says, "*Don't you know that life is precious, that life is a gift? So, **use it well!***" And then, to make his point, he tells them this story about a fig tree.

Jesus tells of a fig tree that hasn't born fruit for three years, and the owner of the vineyard would like to do what would have been the reasonable thing to do, which is to cut it down and make room for another tree that **will** bear fruit. But the gardener tells the owner, "*Let it alone for*

one more year, until I dig around it and put more manure on it. If it bears fruit then, great, but if not, we will cut it down.”

What do we make of this strange, unusual parable? In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells this story as he is about to face his own death. And, while this is a parable about judgement, it is **first** and **foremost** a story about **forgiveness and grace**. When commenting on this parable, theologian, Robert Farrar Capon, compares Jesus to the Gardener and he writes:

This entire world lives, as the fig tree lives, under the rubric of forgiveness. The world, of course, thinks and believes otherwise. In its blind wisdom, it **thinks** it lives by merit and reward....But by the foolishness of God, that is **not** the way it works. By the folly of the cross, Jesus becomes sin for us, and he goes outside the camp for us, and he is relegated to the dump for us, and he becomes garbage and compost and manure for us. And then he comes to us. The Gardener who on the cross said, “Father, forgive them,” comes to us with his own body dug deep by nails and spears, and his own being made dung by his death, and he sends our roots resurrection. He does not come to see if we are good: he comes to disturb the caked conventions by which we pretend to be good. He does not come to see if we are sorry: he knows our repentance isn’t worth the hot air we put into it. He does not come to count anything....He comes only to forgive. For free. For nothing...We are saved by grace. We do nothing and we deserve nothing; it is all, absolutely and without qualification, one huge, hilarious gift.

So, come! Come even now as we presently face the challenging questions of WHY, and as our hearts bleed. Come, be fed the food that truly matters, the food that truly sustains us, the food that is all about **forgiveness and grace. It is free, and it is all gift!**