

Sermon Notes: March 23, 2025

Focus: repent to live

[Lectionary Readings](#)

There is a whole lot going on in this gospel story. You've got Pilate mixing the blood of local dissidents while they were making a Temple offering. You've got a local building collapse leading to tragedy. Jesus ties these two things together with figgy parable.

Pilate's and our modern brutality Pilate's brutal act of mixing the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices was likely a form of terror aimed at deterring dissenters. These victims were probably criticizing Pilate's excesses, particularly his exploitation of the people's income for his vanity projects. His friends enjoyed lavish privileges propped up by graft. While the Bible offers few details, scholars who examine Josephus and other extrabiblical sources suggest that these Galileans were murdered as they made offerings in the Jerusalem temple—assassinated by unknown agents who slipped away unnoticed, but who were commissioned by Pilate.

This made me think of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated on March 24, 1980. Initially, Romero was groomed by the wealthy elite of his society, content to let their influence shape the rules. But his views shifted after the assassination of his colleague, Rutilio Grande, a priest who empowered the poor and advocated for change. Grande's work challenged the established order, and his death was meant to send a clear message: self-determination is dangerous. It was a message to the poor that defiance would be met with death.

After Grande's murder, Romero underwent a dramatic transformation. He became a vocal advocate for the marginalized and, like his friend, paid for it with his own blood. Romero's death was a mingled sacrifice—his blood mingled with the altar where he was shot. Romero was celebrating Mass at a small chapel at Hospital de la Divina Providencia when a red car pulled up outside. A gunman emerged, entered the chapel, and shot Romero as he stood near the altar.



Pilate and the Salvadoran elite sought to silence dissenters by using violence as a tool of intimidation. Their message was clear: challenge power at your own peril. And, tragically, it was effective.

God of Disaster? In Jesus' time, many believed suffering was a direct punishment for sin—just like Job's friends in the book of Job. But Jesus rejected this idea outright. When people asked about those killed in building collapses, he made it clear: they weren't worse sinners than anyone else. Their deaths weren't divine punishment.

Take the fall of the Tower of Siloam that Jesus specifically talked about. It was likely a construction accident near the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem. Unlike Pilate's orchestrated brutality, this was random. Maybe *we* would blame shoddy engineering, but most

people then saw it as an “act of God.” The question that stuck in people’s minds was: Was it their fault that they somehow deserved their fate?

Today That same question echoes every time disaster strikes. Without fail, a row of talking heads lines up to assign blame. A helicopter crash? Must be trans people. Hurricanes in the 1980s? God punishing Miami for letting the gays in. Tsunamis? Mother Earth taking revenge for climate change. (Never mind that climate change will cause more than enough suffering without the planet actively seeking retribution.) Kids murdered at Sandy Hook? Crisis actors from the deep state are just trying to scare us.

I bring up these modern examples, so we don’t get too smug about those “unenlightened” ancients who saw disaster as divine wrath. Jesus would be in the public square dismantling Alex Jones’ theology just as he dismantled simplistic ideas about suffering in his own time.

This is about Theodicy—a seminary word that captures the attempt to reconcile an all-powerful, all-good God with the reality of suffering. As we move deeper into 2025, we’re still living with the consequences of a broken theodicy.

Beyond Disaster or Design Jesus moves past both victim-blaming and state-sponsored terror to issue a call to repentance: “Unless you repent, you will all perish.” Jesus urges people to turn toward God’s kingdom before it’s too late—before they wither and become fruitless.

The fig tree as theodicy punchline in the parable The unproductive tree serves as a symbol for Israel (Hosea 9, Jeremiah 8). Its lack of fruit represents the nation’s failure to respond to Jesus and flourish. The owner’s three-year wait for figs may reflect the length of Jesus’ public ministry—a time of calling, cultivating, and nurturing repentance. The gardener’s plea for one more year, a brief extension, speaks to divine patience. The promise to fertilize the tree represents God’s grace.

Yet the parable leaves its ending unresolved. What happens after year four? The uncertainty shifts the burden onto the audience—both then and now. Will we choose renewal to bear fruit, or will we wither away in intransigence?

Repent to live I leave you with a direct quote from Matt Skinner of workingpreacher.org: *Repentance becomes less interesting when people mistake it to mean moral uprightness, expressions of regret, or a “180-degree turnaround.” Rather, here and many other places in the Bible, it refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different perspective.*

“Repentance” cannot be reduced to a reengineered life and ethics...It can be more about being found than about finding oneself. It refers to an entirely reoriented self, to a new consciousness of one’s shortcomings...morality is hardly the horse that pulls the cart.

I think Matt really captures the focus of my sermon well and is the reason why we read this gospel today – Repent toward life, not away from death.

Todd