

Lent 3 2019, St Mary Magdalen

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+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Lizard shade turned torch, what thorns I bore
Nomadic shepherds clipped. Still,
I've stood, a soldier listening for the word,
Attack, a prophet praying any ember be spoken
Through me in this desert full of fugitives.
Now, I have a voice. Entered, I am lit.
Remember me for this sprouting fire,
For the lash of flaming tongues that lick
But do not swallow my leaves, my flimsy
Branches. No ash behind, I burn to bloom.
I am not consumed. I am not consumed.

In Jericho Brown's beautiful poem, 'The Burning Bush', we get a retelling of Moses' meeting with God in Exodus from the bush's perspective. The bush is still and voiceless, battered and stripped of its thorns, defenceless. Then it is illuminated by the flames, and in a way that is not destructive but enriching. 'Now, I have a voice. Entered, I am lit./ . . . I burn to bloom./I am not consumed'. Illumination in the ordinary, even in the midst of suffering. The thorns of a bush glowing brighter than the stars of heaven. God meets Moses, God meets us, in the here and now.

In 1 Corinthians we are reminded of how God remained present with the people of Israel throughout their time in the wilderness, not just as a one-off occurrence in the bush: baptism through cloud and sea, bread from heaven, water from a rock.

And the Gospel of Luke elaborates upon this in a particular way. Not only does God come to us in the here and now to meet our needs, but in unending mercy, tenderness,

and ceaseless, perfect love. And even more specifically, a tenderness and love in our weakness and brokenness.

Jesus is in the middle of a sermon covering various themes about being vigilant while looking toward the last judgement. And people question, what about now? And they assume a direct line between iniquity and judgement. They ask about those who have been, in their mind, judged by the way their lives had come to an end: Jewish pilgrims from Galilee are reported to be cut down by Pilate while making their sacrifices, and another group in Jerusalem met their fate by a tower falling on them. The people assume these must have been greater sinners than others to meet such an end.

But Jesus responds first by pointing out that the tragedy that befell them was in no way the result of their sin. Second, he turns the issue back on the listeners: stop thinking about the sin of others, assuming they are a cause of destruction and judgement in the world, and look inwardly at yourselves, repent, change the way you view the world.

Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree to help us down this road of repentance, toward changing our minds about God and about ourselves. The owner of the fig tree wants the vinedresser to cut down the tree because it has not borne fruit in years (just as Pilate cut down the Galilean pilgrims). But the vinedresser or gardener pleads to save the tree. It's a lost cause, but the gardener, rather inefficiently, wants to continue working its soil.

Christ shows us a picture of the merciful and tender hands of a gardener who does not punish something, destroy something, because it doesn't produce, or behave a certain way, or as a consequence of some evil it has committed, but rather lavishes unwarranted love and care for it, in all its weakness, insufficiency, and unfruitfulness.

Jesus' listeners assume the Galileans and Jerusalemites were punished by God through Pilate for their sins. And in our own day natural disasters and even heinous wilful acts of others have been blamed on various scapegoats and 'sinners' by self-serving and fearmongering so-called Christians. How many times have our ears been

punished by such utter rubbish? But also in our own difficult times of struggle, whether or not we use the language of judgment, it is easy to feel that God is far from us.

Christ shifts our focus, leads us to repent, to change our minds and see the world as God sees the world: Your suffering and brokenness, and the gratuitous suffering of the world around you, is not caused by God punishing you or groups of scapegoat sinners. Those places of need are actually where God's love shows up most vividly and clearly: a dry bush in the wilderness, a fruitless fig tree, the sick and the suffering, the hurting and destitute, a broken body, victorious only through defeat, on the hard wood of the cross.

In your suffering, in the weakness of your body and the broken places in your mind, in our emotional instability and struggle of pain or loss, in the overwhelmed-ness of this life, God's love in Christ is not being withheld from us, on the contrary, love is made more present, more immediate, in our lives.

Jesus' hearers were convinced that God was far from those who suffered, that the suffering were receiving punishment for their iniquity, but Jesus calls them to repent, to change their minds to see that the suffering are the ones whom God is most evidently near. And Christ's whole life is a living expression of this reality: dining with sinners, touching lepers, embracing those whom no one else would even acknowledge as fully human because of their sickness which was interpreted as divine judgement, divine abandonment.

We so desperately want to see God as a god who is like us, who rejects those we reject, who sees as untouchable those we see as untouchable, who abandons those we leave behind and exclude. But the presence of Jesus calls us to repentance, to a new vision of God and of ourselves; to welcome, receive, embrace those the world abandons, and to know that in our own lives of suffering and loss God's love is present, tending the soil for just a little more time, and a little more, and a little more; that God's love is present and we 'burn to bloom'.

The dry bush in the wilderness, shining brighter than the stars of heaven. The tender gardener with calloused hands, tending to our suffering soil and choked out roots. The glory of God illuminated in flesh and bone and desire and loss in the crucified Christ.

Lent is not just a liturgical season. Sometimes long periods of months and years feel like the joy of resurrection, the fulfilment of our wilderness journey, will never come. Sometimes whole lives are lived in Lenten wilderness. And I don't have an answer for the blows this world hurls at us, but I can point us to the hope and comfort Christ offers us here: the darkness of this world's force on you is not a result of your guilt or God's judgment. God's judgement drives away darkness. The emptiness of your loss is not a sign of God's abandonment, but rather that God is present, tending your soil in the midst of an often inexplicable and blindingly sorrowful world.

Christ's Lenten call to repentance is not a drudging moralist command, but an invitation to see the world and ourselves anew; to behold the beauty of God among us in the thorns and the fire, in the wilderness and the cross, and at last in the hope of resurrection glory.