

Third Sunday in Lent  
The Reverend John H. Brock

Sunday, March 7, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63; 1-9;  
I Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We've got three really weird scripture readings today that don't really relate very well to each other. We've got Jesus talking about stuff that comes out of the back end of cows; we've got Paul chastising the Corinthians about trying to live in the same manner as the ancient Jews did, and according to Paul's account, the ancient Jews pretty much blew it all around because they chose to follow god with a small "g" and not a capital "G"; and, just *what* is Isaiah talking about?

It is like, what is going on here? The people who put our weekly lessons together (it is called the lectionary, or the weekly pericope), really try to get the lessons all to go together. But sometimes, the pastor will look at these lessons and say, "Is there really a theme going on here? Couldn't they have come up with something that works together a little better?" So, I am stuck with the lessons today. Let's start though with the one in the middle.

Paul is talking to the Corinthians, the church in Corinth. It's part of the Roman Empire; it's a city in Greece. He brings up some bizarre and obscure Hebrew scripture references. Paul was writing to a congregation that is splintering and is fractured. It's pretty well messed up. There were folks there in the congregation who are all hopped up because they say, "I was baptized by Apollo," someone else will say, "Oh yeah, well I was baptized by Cephas," and then there's still others who are saying, "But Paul baptized me." They are bragging about their baptism. They are excited about this because they claim one baptism is better than another, as if who baptized, and who presided your baptism, is going to give you extra special 'God points,' or something.

Paul is dealing with this congregation that is "factoring" over whether or not to eat meat that's been sacrificed to idols, but apparently no one is all that concerned about the fact that there is a member of this congregation who is sexually involved with his father's wife. All this "stuff" is going on, and these folks are thinking that their *actions* are what is going to earn them 'God points.' So Paul has to apply the theological "Dope Slap." 'You think you're good enough? You think you've got it going so well that God's just going to overlook all this backbiting, bickering, and un-Christian behavior that you are doing? You know. God does that SO often, especially when you're trying to live by the Rules instead of living by Grace. Look at how well that worked out for the people of Israel,' Paul says. 'You know, the ones who left Egypt after 400 years of slavery. The people of Israel who were guided by a pillar of smoke, sent by God, during the day, and a pillar of fire, again sent by God, at night. These folks saw firsthand the power of God, because they ate the manna that came down from heaven. They saw and experienced firsthand, the

power of God, and yet what did they do? They doubted. They turned away. Yet God remained faithful to them. Even in all the lousy things that they went through.'

In Isaiah, our lesson is taking place probably after the people have returned from being held decades in captivity over in Babylon. The Babylonians had dragged them away, at least took away the ruling class and the religious leaders. They dragged them several hundred miles from Jerusalem, all the way over to Babylon (which is about where modern day Babylon is). They took them away after they had razed Jerusalem. They tore down the palace, destroyed the city walls, and most important of all, they tore down the Temple. Enough time passes, while they are in captivity, that the Babylonians fall to the Persians. The Persians allow those Hebrews that want to, to return to Jerusalem, to not only go back home, but the Persians underwrite the rebuilding of Jerusalem: the city walls, the palace, and most important of all, the Temple.

From a human point of view, the Persians know that if they allow the Israelites to go back and to rebuild, the Persians will have a steady source of income, some serious coinage coming into their pockets. The drawback to this plan is that the folks who were left in Jerusalem, when the ruling class was drug over to Babylon, is pretty much subsistence kind of living. Those folks returning from Babylon aren't necessarily all that well off financially either. They're all having to work very hard just to endure. There's not enough food, let alone money, to go around.

Yet the Lord God Almighty calls Isaiah to give the people some Theological Hope. 'The day is coming,' says the Lord, 'when there *will* be enough for everyone. Remember that promise, that covenant, I made with David, that I made with all of you,' God says, 'that I will be your God, and you will be my people? Do you remember that? Because **I** do,' says God, 'and I am going to make good on that promise. You all turned away from me, and I had to give you a "time out" by sending you into exile, into Babylon. But now, you have returned. You have to scrape and scabble to get by. Now, I am not asking you to understand the Why,' God says. 'Know this: that I am with you throughout all of these lousy things.'

In Luke's gospel, the reading that we get today, I would personally say has to be one of the weirdest, most bizarre, passages that I have come across in the Gospels, or at least it is in the top ten. Jesus gives us this "parable." First, he talks about an accident in which a bunch of folk were killed. Then he follows it with a parable about a non-producing Fig Tree. What? Who cares about a stupid fig tree that they are going to put manure around to fertilize and get it to produce? Okay, who really cares that out of some stinking manure we are going to get fruit? Come on Jesus, do you honestly expect me to believe that out of this smelly excrement, you're actually going to do something good for me? Well, yes, that tends to be what happens. Out of the lousy things in my life, not always, but many times, good has come. But more important, in all of the lousy things that have happened to me in my life, I know, that God has been there, with me, in all of that lousy stuff.

Now I know that God doesn't cause the lousy things to happen. I think I can rather confidently say that I am the cause of most, if not all, of those lousy things. Ask the folks there in Corinth, honestly, who is it that's responsible for their mess? Was it

God? Was it the Romans? Or was it them? The same holds for the people of Israel. Who got them into that mess in the first place? Did God lead them astray? Did God make them build a golden calf? Or did they decide to do it on their own? I can imagine God saying, "Come on people, take some responsibility here."

In the midst of all the lousy things in my life, I know that God was with me. God helped me learn from them. God took those "lousy things" and made them into the 'fertilizer' that I needed to nurture my faith. And, I think I can speak fairly confidentially, whether you realize it or not, that God is with you in all of your "lousy things," as well. Just because I get to stand up here, wearing this cool looking collar, doesn't mean that I get extra God points. God is with us because of the covenant that was made for us, God is with us because of the waters of our baptism, God is with us wherever we go, whatever we're doing. God has made that covenant. God has made that promise.

So maybe, after all, these lessons are relevant to my life, in North America, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Because God is with me; God does hear what happens to us. God is with us. God guides us. God is prompting us. God's not causing the "lousy stuff," but God is taking that "stuff," and mixing it into our lives. God is helping the "lousy stuff" not to be stinking manure, but fertilizer. God is taking life and making it experience. God is taking "lousy" and making it grow, taking doubt, anger, and frustration, and making them into grace, love and forgiveness.

So maybe, when I sit down to really look at this, maybe I need to stop being like those folks in Corinth, getting distracted by all the little things that are not necessarily all that important. Maybe I should stop being like those folks rebuilding Jerusalem, who were concerned where the mortar was going to come from. Maybe I should stop trying to be like that non-producing fig tree, and instead, just has God has promised, just as God has covenanted with us, stop trying to do things by myself and let God use me and guide me. So that together we can be that witness of God's love, grace and forgiveness to all of the world, that we as believers are called to be doing in the first place.

So the lessons do mean something today — sometimes it just takes me a while to get there.

Amen.