March 20, Lent 3C (Luke 13:1-9)

Jesus obliterates our internal ledgers and points us to repentance.

by Mihee Kim-Kort in the March 9, 2022 issue

It never ceases to amaze me the way kids keep an internal ledger. When it comes to who did what and how we responded and who lost screen time or who got more or did or did not do their chores or worksheets–somehow they are meticulous at keeping track of perceived slights. “Why am I only getting punished? He did it, too!” I often wonder about this vigilance toward keeping the scales balanced. Is it really about fairness? Could it also be the need for explanation? For order? For simply making sense of the world?

In our Gospel text, we find ourselves with Jesus as he turns toward Jerusalem. In this large section of Luke we get a plethora of miracles as well as the bulk of the familiar parables. For Lent, however, we bounce around and land at this moment in chapter 13, listening to Jesus engage the crowds on numerous topics. Someone tells him about a horrific event in which Pontius Pilate killed some people from Galilee. Jesus responds rather sharply that neither these Galileans nor others who died when a tower fell on them are worse sinners than anyone else.

This is difficult. We want there to be a reason for human suffering, a moment we can pinpoint where a person’s life went off the rails. The question of theodicy is a persistent one, and the idea that suffering is punishment for sin is a familiar answer. New Testament scholar Arland Hultgren calls this “one of the most widely held ‘theological propositions’ that exists in popular thinking” among Christians. “It is the quick remedy to explain illness and death,” he writes.

We want an explanation of the world, a way to understand its system and logic. Jesus seems to engage these two tragedies as a way to address the problem of a persistent internal ledger that asks, *Is this how the world works?*—that expects a clear, one-to-one correspondence with what happens to people. But he attempts no alternate explanation for such events. He does suggest that if people are judging

those who died, they should know that they themselves are no different. His response confirms his perspective and his mission: repentance is the key.

Jesus' words echo those of John the Baptizer, who "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). From Advent on, over and over, we are given a vision of a world inaugurated by Jesus that obliterates any and all ledgers. Their math doesn't add up, because God doesn't operate from our one-to-one logic. The through line from John to Jesus in this moment is not the requirement of some moral or behavioral adjustment. It's the call for repentance—in the Greek, a transformation or a change of mind. It's an about-face. The answers to our questions lie hidden within a total change in how we view and understand a person's place in the world.

"Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did," Jesus says twice. Then he tells a parable, as if to explain the urgency of repentance—how it is a matter of life and death. A gardener pleads with a vineyard owner not to make him cut down a barren fig tree. The gardener's word translated "let it alone" is also the root word from which we get "forgiveness." It appears two chapters earlier, in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer (11:4).

Jesus makes a surprising connection between the call to repentance and this parable of the fig tree. The kind of judgment we are quick to use in other people's situations, based on some ledger of fairness, does not reflect God's logic. The fig tree doesn't produce, and so based on the metrics of any farm, it makes sense to cut it down and use its materials for those trees that are thriving and growing. But the servant, whose hope is based on the time and attention he can give the tree, asks for forgiveness—for the time and space to try. He'll treat it as though it is one of the thriving trees, watering it and fertilizing the soil.

And perhaps this is a measure (not a metric) of grace, too. Nadia Bolz-Weber says it this way: "God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings." A loving and nourishing wholeness gives life by making space for what we need in all seasons, whether cultivated or fallow. Forgiveness in this parable is letting go, leaving something alone—in the interest of radical transformation.