

SERMON- Lent 3 (C)

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Exodus 3:1-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

March 23, 2025

Luke 13:1-9

Psalm 63:1-8

OPENING:

Famously, when asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow, Martin Luther said to have said:

“I would plant a tree.”¹

Others might have had a different response: some might throw one last party, take debauchery to another level in those 24 hours.

Others of us might go still in the other direction: they would start praying really hard, repenting and polishing off the resume for what's next.

Luther would plant a tree as a way of saying that he trusts in God, and does not fear. It would be an act of defiance, of Christian hope, to do so.

Questions of sin and salvation, of testing, or not being worthy, hang over our Gospel reading.

You can see why it's chosen for Lent.

It's fashionable among clergy, seminarians even, to say that Lent is your favorite season in the Church year. I think that's because these tough issues, that sometimes you face a lot in the profession, come to the forefront so that everyone is where you are anyway.

I don't know if Lent is my favorite season but we have had our fair share of deaths around here recently, indeed all these questions feel so close, and we come face to face with our own mortality, our fallenness and our brokenness.

Let's go there together with faith and fear, asking ourselves what we would do if the world were to end tomorrow.

¹ Some question about the apocryphal nature of this quote: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/5-quotes-that-luther-didnt-actually-say/>

GOSPEL

I am not quite sure, actually, what Jesus is trying to tell us or how he would instruct us to answer, based on our Gospel readings.

Maybe it all could be summed up in the shortest sermon known to mankind.

Here goes. This is what JC seems to be saying.

Everyone... is a sinner

AMEN

In the story, people try to rile Jesus up around politics (can you imagine!).

They ask: “Did you hear what Pilate is doing to us Galileans in Jerusalem?

Can you believe it?

Even YOU Jesus are going to want to grab the sword on this one.”

And Jesus responds with other stories, 3 of them, including one about a fig tree.

The substance is simply:

“You are a sinner. You are a sinner. You are a sinner.”

Like Oprah, he is saying: “look under your seat, there is a message that reads ‘you are a sinner’; look in the mirror, you are a sinner. Be ready for what comes next.”

HABSBURG:

I have been thinking a lot about funerals lately, planning a few.

Recently, Otto von Habsburg died at the age of 99. Remember the Habsburgs?

This was significant because he was LAST of the crown princes of the Habsburg Empire.

At his funeral, they had the traditional service for the royal dynasty which comes with a little Habsburg twist.

At the door to the church where the Imperial Crypt lies, a ceremony takes place where the funeral procession finds the gate locked to the outside.

The mourners knock. From the inside, someone asks: “WHO demands entry?”

And the family give Otto’s whole name: *Franz Joseph **Otto** Robert Maria Anton Karl Max Heinrich Sixtus Xaver Felix Renatus Ludwig Gaetan Pius Ignatius.*

The voice from inside answers: “We know him not.”

So the family knocks again, the voice answers: “Who demands entry?”

This time they give Otto's whole title: *By the Grace of God Emperor of Austria; Apostolic King of Hungary, King of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia and Lipomeria; King of Jerusalem; Archduke of Austria; Grand Duke of Tuscany and Cracow; Duke of Lorraine....* (it goes on and on)

The voice answers: "We know him not."

The mourners knock one more time: "Who demands entry?"

Finally, they say, simply: "A sinful, mortal human being."

There is a pause... and the Crypt door opens and they are allowed to come inside.²

LENT:

I share this story as a way of helping us think, not only during Lent and not only at funerals, about our identity, about who we are, how we present ourselves to God. To remind ourselves of what we will say in the Offertory Prayer, that we were all wandering Arameans once, and if we pretend or self-delude ourselves thinking that we are not, even the Habsburgs admitted it.

Helpfully both the OT and the NT lessons reiterate that story, so central to God's people, that remind us that we are nothing without God, that we are wandering 'wayfaring strangers' and if we are not that way at this exact moment, then we need to remember when we were, and have solidarity across space and time.

We fail at that, of course, we puff ourselves up and try to rile each other up about this or that. We should take our cue from Jesus who does not take the bait, the oh-so seductive power of fusing religion and nationalism. They try to appeal to his self-righteous anger and it goes nowhere with him. (They should try us instead.)

FUNERAL

Back to funerals, I have preached on this before, about my battles (discussions?) with families over funerals—where how we present ourselves to God, that last day having arrived, is all the sudden here.

At a funeral, for example, the Church, capital C says that all there should, in terms of the remains, is a simple white veil that recalls your baptism.

² Ruse, Austin. "Following The Habsburg Way" *Crisis Magazine* (4/14/2023) <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/following-the-habsburg-way>.

Instead, people, in their grief, they want to include the most dreaded words in the English language; “The funeral spray” an explosion of decorative flowers to ease the pain. Or a “Picture” of their loved one. Or the American flag.

And God Bless ‘em, I get it. The casket or urn is so bare and lonely without it.

Likewise, in our eulogies and funeral homilies, we want to present our loved ones’ achievements, to offer our virtues to a God whom we think is keeping score.

It is unnecessary. God has saved our loved one. God has saved you and me, not through our strivings and disciplines, but because of who we are.

The baptismal mark on our foreheads, somehow made clearer by the smudge we get on Ash Wednesday, that has saved us. We can trust in that regardless of whatever calamity might befall us tomorrow.

Now, to be sure, in that moment of grief in the funeral planning, it’s time to fold, and I usually do, to the well-meaning demands of a grief-stricken family.

But, here in Lent, perhaps it’s time to tell the truth, and reflect on what we would do if the world were to end tomorrow.

CONCLUSION:

I have one example for you. It falls under the category of you cannot make this stuff up.

This week, I kid you not, a member of our Saturday night service asks if they can plant on our campus, a tree, not only that, a fig tree.

I doubt he had read this lesson, I had not read this lesson.

I told him that I know very little about fig trees, when where or how to plant them. All I know is that in the Bible, they are always getting cursed, and then there is this lesson where the fig tree does not grow.

In Scripture, the fig tree is a curious, frequent image old; that’s a symbol of the Jewish people collectively, or each of us as individuals.

If your world were to end tomorrow, which for some of us, actually all of us, what would you do? I would plant a fig tree.

AMEN