

3 Lent, Year C

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

It cannot be lost on you
that the prayers we prayed today
speak to the condition of the world today. ¹

These prayers are hundreds of years old
and have been prayed by millions—maybe billions—
of Christians across the ages,
and yet, they are still necessary.

They are necessary because,
whether we like it or not,
evil still exists.

But why?
Why should there be evil
if our God is the Great I AM, ²
the deliverer of his people?

Why should there be evil
if Christ has conquered Sin?

Why should there be evil
if we humans have had all this time
to pray all these prayers
yet seem to have learned nothing
in our countless cycles
of war, and power, and greed?

Why?

The disciples seem to ask Jesus
the same question today.

They've just heard the news
that the governor Pontius Pilate
has had innocent people
butchered in the Temple
while offering their sacrifices to God. ³

As if that were not savage enough,
he ordered their blood to be mixed

with the blood of their sacrifices:
a cruel mockery of
their worship,
their faith,
and their God.

And even that's not all.
In other news, a tower in a nearby town
had collapsed and killed eighteen people. ⁴

So, just as we would do,
the disciples ask, "Why?"

Jesus, however, does not give a clear answer
except to say that no one sinner is worse than another,
and God does not punish people arbitrarily.

It seems that even for Jesus,
evil is hard to explain.

I have been reading a book
by an English bishop named Graham Tomlin
called *Why Being Yourself Is a Bad Idea*.
I cannot recommend it highly enough.

In it, Bishop Tomlin says
that when we try to explain evil,
most people seem cling to one of three ideas.

Some say evil exists
because we are people with free will.
Humans make choices, some of them are bad,
and the repercussions reverberate.

The problem, though, is that
while that explains many things—
Pilate, Putin, politics—
it does not explain
towers,
tsunamis,
or childhood cancer. ⁵

Others say evil is God's way
of toughening us up.

God gives us trials,
and we are made better people
as we go through them.

Even the Apostle Paul hints at this
in First Corinthians today. ⁶

But the problem there is that
some suffering goes far beyond
what might make us “more mature.”
Some suffering is just suffering. ⁷

And then there are those who believe
evil exists because there is a force
equal and opposite to God—
Lucifer, Satan, the Devil himself—
and we are caught in the middle
of their epic battle.

But make no mistake:
God *has* no equal.

Satan may exist,
but he, like us,
is but another created being:
powerful, yes,
fallen, yes,
dangerous, yes . . .
but not equal to God.

God is either God of everything,
or he is not God at all. ⁸

So how are we to explain evil?

Well, Bishop Tomlin says maybe the reason
evil is so hard to explain
is because evil does not actually exist
in the same way everything else does.

He says to think about a tree and the shadow it casts.
A tree is a concrete thing.
It is real.
It is beautiful.
It is good.
But its shadow?

“The shadow is not a thing at all;
it is the absence of something—
the absence of sunshine.
In the same way,” he says,
“evil is not a ‘thing’;

it is the absence of Good.
It is a no-thing.”⁹

And if that is true, he says,
“all that exists is good.
There are no bad things,
just good things
that have gone wrong.”¹⁰

And there we are.

“Evil,” he says, “happens when created things . . .
turn away from the source of life and love
and, instead, turn inwards on themselves.”¹¹
We talked in Thursday Bible study this week
about how truly lonely
the dictators of the world must be
because here, it seems, are men
who have turned in on themselves.
They are all they have.
They are not just bent,
but bent on destruction . . .
and all for no good purpose.

“Evil *has* no purpose,” says Bishop Tomlin,
“because it is the absence of purpose.
It can have no meaning,
because it is the absence of meaning.
It can have no point,
because it is by definition pointless.”¹²

This is why when we see evil things happening
we can feel so helpless.
It feels like we are stuck with it forever.

But that is where Jesus does have an answer today.
He, too, uses a tree to make his point.

“When you look at a tree,” he says,
“it can be hard to tell if it is growing at all.
Day after day after day, it looks the same.
You see no growth.
You perceive no change.
But you know better.
Something is happening.
It *will* come to flower.
It *will* bear fruit.

And in the meantime,
*you just keep fertilizing it.”*¹³

Jesus knows the cruel nothingness of evil
because he went through it on Good Friday.
More than that,
he knows its defeat is sure
because he came out the other side of it
alive on Easter Sunday.

The shadow of evil may be hard to explain,
but it has already been defeated.
Its days are numbered,
and it is actively crumbling all around us.

Yes, we still live with its vestiges
as it gasps and gasps
for one final, violent word.

And because of that,
yes, we may feel
day after day after day
like the Tree of Life
is dormant
or dying
or dead.

But we know better.
We know *something* is happening.
We know the One who planted
this beautiful existence of ours,
and we know he *will* bring it to flower.

In the meantime,
we just keep fertilizing it.

How?
Well you already know that, too.

You do what Christians
have been doing for ages.

You say your prayers.
Repent of your sins.
Choose love.
Render good.
Offer hope.
Broker peace.

Build community.
Defend the weak.
Help the poor.
Get over yourself.
Get out of yourself.
Fight the good fight.
Stand for the truth.

We pray our prayers
because evil still exists,
but it is crumbling all around us,
and its shadowy days are numbered.

Do not let *anyone*
tell you different.

Amen.

¹ The congregation prayed the Great Litany, page 148 of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

² Exodus 3:14

³ Luke 13:1

⁴ Luke 13:4

⁵ Tomlin, Graham. *Why Being Yourself Is a Bad Idea*. SPCK. 2020. 71-73.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:13

⁷ Tomlin 74-75.

⁸ Ibid. 76-77.

⁹ Ibid. 78.

¹⁰ Ibid. 78. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Ibid. 79.

¹² Ibid. 79. Emphasis added.

¹³ Interpretation of Luke 13:6-8