

## Not What We Expect

In Zen Buddhism, there is a saying, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” It’s a rather striking saying, directing Buddhists to do violence against Buddha, the founder of their own religion. But the saying is meant to be taken literally. Rather, the point is that it’s easy to get fixated on one’s own image or conception of the Buddha, rather than the real thing. And whatever your conception is of the Buddha, it’s WRONG! So Buddhists must “kill” that image and keep practicing.

The same thing, I think, could be said of God. Sometimes, if you love God, if you want to be faithful to him, you have to kill your “God.” If we want to know God truly, if we want to encounter the real God, we have to destroy our false images of Him. We have to throw out our expectations and assumptions of who God should be and how God should act.

That seems to be Jesus’ point in today’s gospel lesson, to challenge the expectations and assumptions that his fellow Jews have about God. The episode starts when some Jewish leaders come up to Jesus with some news. “Jesus, did you hear about the group of Galileans that just died. They were on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to make an offering to the Lord, when suddenly a squad of soldiers from that tyrant Governor Pilate showed up and slaughtered them right then and there. Just terrible! Murdered them while giving their offering! Mixed their blood with the blood of their sacrifices!” Then one of them wondered aloud what these Galileans had done to deserve such a thing, and that just sets Jesus off.

“Deserve? What did they do to *deserve* that? Do you really think that those Galileans were worse sinners than any other Galileans, and that that is why this happened to them—because God was somehow punishing them? What about the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed. You’ve heard about them, haven’t you? Do you think that those poor people deserved their fate more than anyone else in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, no.”

Those who heard Jesus’ reply were struck speechless, because the people he was speaking to believed that it is God’s job to punish evil and reward good, to make sure we get what we deserve in the end. Bad things should happen to bad people, they reckon, and good things should happen to good people. Those at the front of the line should go first, and those at the back should go last.

And, really, who among us doesn’t believe that, too? We think that that is God’s job—to make sure life is fair: God’s supposed to make sure that the righteous prosper, and that it’s sinners who suffer. You remember how after 9/11, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson suggested that the attack on the Twin Towers was God’s judgment on America for abortion and homosexuality. A few years later, when Hurricane Katrina washed out New Orleans, others said that God was punishing the people of the Big Easy for their moral degeneracy, sexual immorality and general

sinfulness. A few years after that I saw a picture that suggested that the hurricanes that had hit Florida that year were the result of Florida voting for the Republican candidate in the last election.

But it's not just fundamentalists and partisans who think this way. I mean, we may talk about God's love and mercy, but really most of us believe that sin equals curses and obedience equals blessings. That's why, whenever something bad happens to us—our car breaks down, we lose our job, our child disappoints us—we ask, “Why me? What did I do to deserve this?” Or, when we do right, we can't shake our sense of entitlement, of our reward being justified, the feeling that our selflessness has earned us something.

Thing is, that's not the God we've got. We've got a God who, in this world at least, commands the sun rise on both the good and the evil, who sends rain on both the just and the unjust. A God who pays the workers who arrive at the end of the day the same wages as those who have worked all day long. A God who seems willing to let the weeds and the wheat grow together. A God who forgives wicked tenants again and again when they abuse his representatives. A God whose extreme patience and restraint and mercy borders on profligacy, even recklessness.

And while it's true that we do often reap what we sow in this world, it's also true that sometimes you can sow, and sow, and sow, and reap only the whirlwind. And there are other times, as Jesus tells his disciples, when we reap from fields in which we've sowed no seeds, where the bumper crop is all gift, where the fruit appears despite our efforts, not because of them.

Now, this is hard for us to accept. As human beings, we are desperate to make sense of our world. When faced with the question, Why do good things happen here and bad things happen there?, we don't like having to say “I don't know.” And so we try to divine meaning in the mystery of suffering. People get AIDS only because they are promiscuous. Little children die because God needed them in heaven. This suffering is happening to you now because of what you did thirty years ago. It's somehow easier for us to believe in an angry God or an indifferent God than it is to accept a God whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, whose love is not our love, and whose justice, at least in this world, is not our justice.

So what if God is not the Cosmic Cop we think He is? What if suffering is not always a direct message of God's displeasure? What if, instead, the reason behind so much of our world's suffering is simply the fact that we live in a world that is fallen, broken? And what if the proper response to tragedy is not to assign blame, but rather to acknowledge the precariousness of our own situation?

That's what Jesus seems to be saying in today's gospel lesson. No, those Galileans who died while making their offerings and the people crushed beneath the tower's rubble weren't any worse sinners than anybody else. But unless *you* repent,” Jesus says, “you will all perish as they did. Unless you repent, your own death or suffering will be just as much a shock to you as it was to those people. Unless you repent, you will all perish just as unsuspectingly as they did.”

Whoa, we're thinking, where did that come from? One minute we're having a nice, philosophical conversation about the causes of suffering and all of a sudden Jesus has his finger in our face

warning us to get our act together—or else! Didn't Jesus just tell us God doesn't mete out punishments like that?

It seems that Jesus is just as eager to counter the “get-out-of-line-and-I'll-blast-you” image of God common among some conservative Christians as he is to shatter the indulgent, tolerant, live-and-let-live “God” professed by liberal Christians. God is merciful, sure, but we cannot presume on his mercy. One day, when we die, or when Jesus returns, we will all be held accountable for the life we live. Jesus gives us a warning: It's not just the victims of a tragedy that deserve punishment; we all do. We all fall short of the mark. And it's only by God's grace that we haven't all met our demise already.

To illustrate his point, Jesus tells a story about a fig tree that won't produce figs. Once there was a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard. And year after year he waits, and waits, and waits for the fig tree to bear fruit. The man loves figs – there is nothing sweeter, more delightful than a fig. So he watches that fig tree grow every day, and he dreams about the figs. Day after day he comes searching for that first fig . . . almost tasting it in anticipation . . . but nothing. Nothing.

And how long is he supposed to wait? How long are we would wait with a fig tree, with a church, with a job, with an addict, with an unhealthy relationship, with a life that is bearing no fruit? That fig tree is not just wasting space, it's hurting the vineyard. It's sucking up all resources of the soil, absorbing all the nutrients and moisture, not leaving enough for the other plants. Just taking, and taking, and taking, never giving anything back. Finally the vineyard owner tells the gardener, “Just cut the thing down. Grab the chainsaw and at least we'll get some firewood out of this tree. At least then it won't do any more harm.” But this gardener pleads for patience, “Lord, let's wait. Grant it a reprieve. Forgive its fruitlessness for just one more year. Let me dig around it and work with it. Maybe I can use some of this manure to fertilize it. And maybe this tree will grow some figs. If it doesn't, then we can cut it down.” “Alright.”

As the parable suggests, the vineyard owner, God, is patient. His patience is an expression of His love and grace. Sometimes God's grace comes in the form of forgiveness. Sometimes it comes in the form of a gift, such as the birth of a child or some great opportunity. And sometimes, God's graciousness is seen in allowing us time, time to learn from our past, to profit by our mistakes, time to start over.

I'll give you an example. Michael wasn't much of a husband, was an even worse father. He was a talented physician, much in demand. Therefore he was always at the hospital, always working. It wasn't a surprise to hear that his wife of 20 years just left him one day. She said she didn't know him anymore, that she couldn't take it. His children never see him now that they are grown. Why bother? He didn't seem to want to see them when they were young. He has remarried now. At 60, he is starting over. That's what he said he was doing, “starting over.” “Here, toward the end of my life, I'm getting a second chance. I'm going to do better this time. I've learned a thing or two. I'm going to do right.” I expect more than one person considers him to be foolish, considering how little he did with marriage the first time around, and now married a second time! But as Jesus' story of the fig tree suggests, there is reason to rejoice, for there is still time, time for second chances, for learning from our mistakes, for repenting.

No matter what we've done, no matter how we've spent our lives, whether we've always done the respectable, responsible thing, or if we've done things in the past we wish we hadn't, things that we are ashamed of—betrayed friends, abandoned loved ones, squandered the gifts that God has given us—by God's grace, there's still time. God is giving us one of the greatest of gifts - the gift of time.

The question is, how will we use that gift? Will we make use of the time that God gives? Will we take advantage of the time and give ourselves over to self-examination, to honest confession, to joyful turning, to embracing God's purposes for our life? Maybe, with this extra time, we may yet bear fruit. Because of the gardener's pleading, there is still time for us to blossom and be fruitful.

The good news is that our God is *not* a Cosmic Cop, always looking to catch us doing wrong. But instead, as the book of Numbers says, "The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression." Because God is who God is, and not who we expect him to be, there is hope for us. There is still time. Thanks be to God!