

The Third Sunday of Lent
February 28, 2016

Today we find ourselves half way through Lent, our unique catholic retreat time. For 40 days, the entire church, from the greatest to the least, is called to take a look at how our life reflects what we believe about God. But remember: This retreat is not a time of rest.

Today's readings call us to focus on the fact that now is the only time we have to live the call of this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

To help us understand this, our first reading has us standing with Moses, who hears God speak from the blazing bush. As Moses stands barefoot in the desert, God introduces Himself as the great I AM.

When we want to know what that means, we hear God explain, "I am the God of your ancestors, the God who watches over the afflicted, who hears their cries, who feels their suffering and who sends you to rescue them."

It's easy to understand why Moses hid his face. It wasn't just the wonder of the celestial sound-and-light show but the *mission* he received. So we could say that Moses' very first theological lesson was that there's no knowing God without repercussions.

What's more, and this is the second lesson, God is a real attention-getter, and he'll use all kinds of mysterious signs to get noticed so that he can hand off the mission of divine mercy.

This is one of the connections between Moses' story and today's Gospel, where Jesus warned the crowd that they'd better bear fruit rather than just stand around making shallow assumptions about God.

That crowd telling Jesus about Pilate's bloody tyranny differed from us primarily only in terms of technology. While we have 24-hour news channels, Facebook and Twitter to keep us abreast of every horrific happening around the world, the ancient crowd had to rely on witnesses and gossips.

Still, for them as for us, those reporting the news are the ones who decide what story to spread and how to frame it to convey the message they want to deliver.

Luke's account begins with the unidentified crowd entranced by rumors about Pilate's brutalities in Galilee. "What a great story to tell Jesus! Let's hear what he thinks of it. Surely he'll recognize the avenging hand of God there. Thank heavens we're not like those people."

Well, obviously this crowd hadn't been following Jesus very much, a conclusion we reach not because they were out of line — which they were — but because they didn't know what a bad idea it was to expose their self-righteousness so blatantly when talking to Jesus.

So naturally, Jesus' first response was to undermine their judgmental attitude by asking them to question why those particular Galileans and no others deserved so much suffering.

He clearly didn't buy the idea that they were the worst of the lot. Then, as He often did, Jesus offered a counter-example.

If they could interpret Pilate's cruelty as the just punishment due to special sinners from Galilee what about the tower that toppled on people in Siloam? Were those victims the most uniquely deserving of divine vengeance among all the residents of Jerusalem? Jesus' answer was clear and two-fold.

“No! Don’t think you’ve found God’s hand at work through a tyrant or accidents from faulty construction. Rather than assume guilt and divine retribution, take a look at yourselves. What if Pilate came after you or the walls fell in right now?”

That’s where the parable of the gardener who wanted to rejuvenate the fig tree comes in. The gardener plays the role of Jesus and the prophets in saying, “Don’t end up like this. Let me shake you out of your sluggishness. I’ll do anything I must to wake you up, even if you think it stinks! But be careful. You don’t have forever.

You see, what Jesus did was, he reframed the crowd’s reading of events. While they were fixed on accusations of sin, Jesus was calling for people to bear fruit. While the crowd assumed that God is on watch for wrongdoing, Jesus spoke in the name of the God of Moses, who seeks people willing to work with Him to put divine mercy into practice.

The crowd focused on transgressions committed, and he on untapped potential. And by doing so, Jesus turned the tragic tales upside down.

Lent calls us to reflect on our life of faith: What we believe about God and how our daily activities express our faith far better than reciting any creed. Today’s readings invite us to consider how we interpret the events of our day in two ways. First, we’re warned against superficial judgments. Secondly, and far more importantly, we’re called to notice God drawing our attention to the world’s need for the fruits of mercy.