

**The Third Sunday in Lent**  
**Revised Common Lectionary – Year C**  
**March 7, 2010**  
**St. James' Episcopal Church, Pullman, WA**  
**The Rev. Mary Beth Rivetti, Rector**

*1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9*

In the days following the magnitude 8.8 earthquake in Chile it was as if there was a global form of wishful thinking, or was it compassion fatigue? There didn't appear to be more than a handful of deaths. Regrettable. Sorrowful. But it could have been so much worse. By the end of the week, cameras were finally able to get to the areas hit hardest, to see that what the quake hadn't knocked down, the tsunami had swallowed up. The death toll soared. Millions are homeless. It could have been so much worse, but it was still very, very bad.

In those early days, there were stories about why the devastation was not as great as it had been in Haiti. Because of the effectiveness of the building codes. Because Chile's democracy worked. But then the cameras got in to see the splintered wood left in place of whole communities. Yes, Chile's infrastructure was and is in better shape than Haiti's – by far. But this was an earthquake measuring 500 times more powerfully than the one that struck Haiti. It is beyond what the mind can fathom.

It's so very human to desire control over that which is beyond what the mind can fathom. And so we construct immediate narratives to protect us from what we see before our eyes – they must have done something wrong, they could have done something differently, and then the final platitude, the wishful thinking – God never gives us trials beyond what we can handle.

Jesus asks the crowd if those Galilean freedom fighters were more sinful than the rest of us – the ones whose blood Pilate sprinkled in with the sacrifices at the altar. He asks if the people crushed when the tower in Siloam collapsed were more deserving of death. Their death was untimely, overwhelming. No one gets out alive. But we can repent. We can do something about the life we have before us while we have time.

Paul wants his listeners to get rid of the idea that having been baptized as Christians they have somehow bought celestial fire insurance. Their behavior has put him in mind of the slaves who were freed by the mighty power of God, who still gave in to grumbling, infighting, idolatry, sexual misconduct – and they had just been surrounded by powerful evidence of God's presence – the pillar of fire, the parting of the sea, the passover miracle, the Rock that gave them drink in the parched places – and they still gave in to the temptation to act as if nothing had changed. As if there was nothing to hope for. As if they were not in the hands of miracle. He's played around a bit with the story – because he's deliberately constructing a biblical parallel to the Philippians – a congregation that was beset by grumbling, infighting, eating food sacrificed to idols, engaging in sexual misconduct. His point is not really to tell the story of the Exodus, but to use that familiar tale to remind the Corinthians that they are in the hands of the miracle. Having been baptized into Christ they are living that amazing life of freedom while they journey to the promised land – but that doesn't mean they've arrived. Life happens. The world around you will remind you of how good you had it back in Egypt, when you were slaves to the power of death. Those are the trials that Paul refers to when he says, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength.” Not the overwhelming nature of the world – falling towers, earthquakes without precedent, hurricane. But the allure of responding to the world around us in the ways we used to do, in the ways that worked for us before we turned our lives over to God and made those baptismal promises we reaffirm together whenever someone joins our company. God is faithful, like that amazing Rock in Paul's version of the story, the Rock that was Christ, that accompanies us on the way. *God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.* Lead us not into temptation, we pray every day. Save us from the time of trial. In the prayer made famous by the New

Zealand Prayer Book in 1980, we hear those words differently. *In times of temptation and testing, strengthen us. / From trials too great to endure, spare us. / From the grip of all that is evil, free us.*

It's Lent. We get to spend this holy season taking a look at the ways in which we are succumbing to temptation. Examining our lives more intently than usual perhaps. But engaging in a review that we can do every night before bed in an exercise that asks us to weigh the pros and cons of the day – How did the day go? When did I feel most like I was walking in God's presence? When did I feel like God wasn't there? And then before we fall sleep, offering up that day with thanksgiving to God, who is with us at all times, maybe most of all when we don't feel God's presence.

It's Lent and it's easy for us to take our *examen* so seriously we might feel like that owner of the fig tree – time to chop it down. Tear it up. Might as well just give up, this is just a worthless piece of wood. It's Lent, and every year the faithful gardener stands between us and that judgment and says, give it one more year. Let me keep working to bring this tree to its fullness of being. One more year.