

**Lent 3 Prayers, Sunday, March 20, 2022**

**Congregational Prayer Concerns**

Rona's mother Vi, Jenny & family, Randy Greer, Tiff and family, Don & the family of the late Penny Sawyer, Maynard & Welter families of the late Paula Welter, Cathy Tredenick, Karl Crocker, Linda Hepburn, Marissa Dale's Aunt, Brian & Kathy, Fraser (in Poland helping refugees escape Ukraine) the people of Ukraine, Michelle (*Carol C.*) Lucas, Bob Weare, Silcox family, Tucker Johnson, Floyd & Sharon Axford, Shirley Griffin, Cherie Doyon, Larry Seabrook, Evelyn Crafts granddaughter Brittany

*Silent Prayers*

**Morning Prayer** Rejoicing yet Thirsting (inspired by Psalm 63)

**We do rejoice in you, God our God**

**We rejoice in your steadfast love and faithfulness**

**– a rich feast for our souls.**

**We rejoice that you shelter us in the shadow of your wings**

**– strong protection against the storms.**

**We rejoice that you are more powerful than  
the troubles that trouble us.**

**We rejoice that, when we wander far from You,  
losing our way,**

**you do not leave us on our own.**

**You come to us in Jesus, your Word made flesh.  
dwelling among us, full of your grace and your truth.**

**O God who has drawn near, you know us as we are:  
the songs of praise tell only part of the story.**

**We have wandered down many paths,  
seeking happiness or glory,  
we have trusted in lesser gods,  
looking for safe haven from the dangers that threaten.  
But the deep hungers are not satisfied;  
the fears and anxieties still haunt us.**

**And now we know:**

**our souls thirst for you, the living God.**

**Show us your power and your glory.**

**Take our weariness**

**and send your Holy Spirit to renew our hope.**

**Take our fears**

**and grow new courage in us.**

**Take our resignation to the way things are  
and pull us into your passionate love.**

Lord Jesus, you meet us in the wilderness of our days,  
 and fill us with the bread of life.  
 You meet us in the desert of our loneliness  
 and streams of living water start to flow.  
 We drink deeply of the gift of your presence,  
 and we rejoice,  
 for you have made us glad. Amen.

~ written by Christine Jerrett, and posted on Christine Jerrett: Reflections on being the Church in God's new creation.

Scripture: Luke 13: 1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Sermon: CULTIVATING TIME

Farming methods have changed a lot since my years growing up among the cows on my parent's dairy farm. Our farm consisted of 99 acres, about 90 of them clay soil or mixed. There was one field located at the very back of the property that was totally different. Instead of having a flat and hard surface, that one field was somewhat hilly and sandy. Dad had to be a bit careful when he drove the tractor across that field--- the only time I ever saw my tea totaling father a bit "tipsy."

Even though farming has changed in so many ways, the arrival of Spring in this hemisphere, means that farmers must soon "spring into action." As soon as weather allows, implements will be scratching the surface of earth's bare skin. Soils will be tested for nutrients and PH. Seed if not already ordered will be, along with fertilizer. Farms which raise critters, such as cows or horses or are organic operations, have a head start in the fertilizer department.

My grandparents on both sides of my family were farmers. When Mom and I happened to be driving past a field where manure had recently been spread, my Mom would never fail to quip, "Oh, someone's been spreading honey, as my Dad used to say." We would both chuckle, as we temporarily *wound up* the car windows. (Do you remember *winding up* the car windows?)

Spring is a busy time for farmers, as it is for gardeners and vineyard owners, and all who are at their happiest when our boots are muddy and the gardening gloves are pulled on, ready to cultivate and plant. Even though my digs are relegated to the area of a flower bed,

each Spring I happily anticipate the resurrection of my tulips, which will eventually unfold in bouquets of pink and purple blooms. On St. Patrick's Day I noticed that some of those reddish-green shoots are emerging from hibernation. When the times are uncertain or chaotic there is some comfort and a measure of certainty that we derive from the predictability of the seasons.

King Solomon has been credited as the author of a poem about life's life-cycle. One commentator speculated that it was a farmer, not a king who penned it, given the entitled lifestyle of a monarch as grandiose as Solomon. But then again, Solomon for all his wealth and wisdom had rural roots. Perhaps he had listened to his father David tell stories about growing up on his father's farm, where he tended his father's sheep. So, a kingly farmer, or a farming King wrote:

*For everything there is a season, and a time  
for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

This poem eloquently expresses some of the polar opposite realities of human existence. Life holds within its grasp joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedies, loves and hates. The question which follows Solomon's poem asks, "What gain have the workers from their toil?" In other words, what are we humans going to do with the precious time that we have to live this life of ours?

Something that we think we can do, and we try to do, but can't fully do, is control what happens in our lives. We'd rather not think about it nor do we like being reminded, but there are no guarantees that life even with nature's cyclical rhythms will unfold as we think it should. And when it doesn't, we are left stunned, surprised, shaken. Because we think we are in control or feel the need to be, we look for answers, we try to make sense out of the nonsense, we use logic to decipher the illogical. When people can't find a straight forward reason for what is wrong, they may make someone the scapegoat. The scapegoat is usually a person or group who they see as different, weak, or less than. Or if all else fails, they'll point their fingers at God. For at least the first half of my lifetime, natural disasters were labeled as "acts of God."

One day some people who were present with Jesus told him about the Galileans who had been murdered by Pontius Pilate as they were in a sacred place offering their sacrifices to God. Although they didn't come out and ask a question Jesus responds as if they had.

Jesus was always good at taking a moment and making it a teaching moment. The unspoken query which he answered was this: *What did the Galileans do to displease God so much that God caused this to happen even as they were making their sacrifices to God?*

This might be the first question that we would have asked Jesus if we had been among the crowd that day. And yet, as you've witnessed an untimely death or lived through a tragic loss, or witnessed the devastation in Ukraine, haven't you wondered, even as a passing thought, if God was behind it trying to teach humans a lesson?

Such was the general mentality of the religious elite and others in Jesus' day. If something bad happened – diseases, natural disasters, invasions, or other calamities—they must be God's punishment. Even today among some Christians, there is a belief that a calamity or unexpected death is God-sent.

For example, in 2010 when Haiti was hit with a devastating earthquake, an American TV Evangelist said that it was God's punishment on the people for making a pact with Satan some years before. (ref. Leah D. Schade)

In his reaction to the unspoken question about the terrible murders of fellow Galileans, Jesus gave a hard NO. NO the Galileans did not do anything to deserve their demise. And NO neither did the eighteen innocents who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when a tower collapsed on them. There was no sin committed by the victims that deserved God's condemnation. However, that does not mean that sinfulness did not play a significant role in these events.

For instance, Pilate and his minions sinned by murdering unarmed Galileans in their place of worship. And perhaps those who were responsible to maintain the tower of Siloam had been neglectful in their responsibilities. On that day as Jesus looked into the faces of the people who believed that when times got rough, that God was punishing them, he said, "No, God was not behind these deaths. But, Unless you repent then you too will perish."

Well, that clears things up!

Instead of giving direct and clear messages, Jesus like to hide the meaning in a story, so that people were forced to search for the answers themselves and maybe find the one that altered their assumptions. So, Jesus told the folks a parable about a barren fig tree. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.

The tree was alive. The tree appeared healthy. We can picture it as leafy and lush. The birds had already built their nests in its branches. As he had done for the past 3 summers, the owner of the tree climbed the ladder and pulled some branches down to his face level. And then he got down, moved the ladder to the other side of the tree and inspected the branches. There was not one fig to be found on that tree! Not one!

In a fit of temper, the man leapt from the ladder and turned to spout to his hired man, the gardener: "Cut it down! I'm sick and tired of waiting for that darned fig tree to produce!" But the Gardener, who loved getting his hands dirty and loved that tree, just as he loved the vines that grew nearby said, "Sir, let's not give up on this tree just yet. The tree is alive and leafy. Look, the robins have built their nests. I believe that this tree has even more to offer; to become all it was meant to be. So instead of destroying it, let's cultivate it. Instead of cutting it down, let's do all that we can to build it up. So, I promise that I will dig around it. You can buy some really rich manure with which to fertilize it. And if by next year, this tree doesn't bear some figs, then, sir, *you* can cut it down."

What lessons did this parable have for Jesus' audience, those to whom he had said, "The people who were killed and crushed to death are no worse sinners than you are, so repent, or you too will perish?" Well, we don't know exactly what *they* thought and that is both the joy and the challenge of a parable. Like beauty is in the eye of the beholder, a parable's meaning lies within the heart of the **hearer**.

First, let's remember that the word 'repent' means change, or to turn around.

Repent means to stop that which draws us further from God and do that which can draw us closer to God. What did the people around Jesus that day have to repent of? Well, maybe they had to repent of thinking that calamities whether they are personal or communal is God's punishment for sin. God is not like the owner of the fig tree who in a fit of pique yelled: "*Cut that tree down! It's had 3 years to produce! Time's Up!*" If God were like the owner of the tree, there would be no humans who would live past the age of 3.

Isn't God more like the gardener? Isn't God the one and only one who never ever gives up on the ones he loves? Shouldn't the people of God repent of our finger pointing and judging others and become like the gardener?

Perhaps the lesson in the parable for the crowd that day was if we want to obey and serve God, then let's roll up our sleeves and do what we can to help make the world better. As the gardener said, "Let it be for one more year. I'll dig, I'll fertilize, I'll water, I'll pray, I'll pull the weeds. I'll give that tree every chance to live its best life." Isn't that the message that the Bible consistently gives about God's relationship with God's world?

God created the world and called it good. God created humanity in God's likeness, and called us very good. God gifted humanity with all we need to live and thrive on this full, lush, and beautiful planet. It will always be the case that we will have to deal with the polar opposites of the life-cycle, just as

Solomon prophesied in his poem. Life is filled with all kinds of challenges and opportunities, sorrows and joys, births, and rebirths. It is simply a fact that we live in an imperfect world. Some things happen for no apparent reason. But a lot of stuff happens because of wrong choices, bad behaviors and human's stubborn resistance to repent and refusal to surrender control to The Highest power.

*To everything there is a season and a time for every matter under Heaven.*

Jesus' ministry was time-constrained. Unlike the expectations of most people who assume that our lives will extend into old age, Jesus knew that his time was short and his days, numbered. And so, in the time he had, he daily rolled up his sleeves grabbed his spade and went to work. With passion, he attacked the hard unrelenting crust of disease and despair with his healing touch. He plunged the sharp point of the Spirit's spade into stubborn soil of self-righteous religion and fertilized it with the nutrients of truth and forgiveness.

He sought out the lost sheep and lifted up women, and children to their equal place. Jesus toiled with sweat, blood and tears, living fully and selflessly in a span of three years.

He gave up his life upon a barren, lifeless tree--- so that we might embrace life in all its fullness and bear the fruit of God's kingdom in our time.

What is the fruit that we bear for the kingdom?

St. Paul provided a partial list of the fruit God can produce in our lives.

*"But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*

*Against such there is no law."* Galatians 5: 22-23

Commented [PC1]:

**These are just a sampling the fruits that are produced in our lives when we repent of whatever attitude or behavior we carry that makes us question if God is against us. No. Nothing that you do will stop God from loving you. So let us focus, not on our shortcomings, or the shortcomings of others. Instead, lets roll up our sleeves and commit ourselves to being God's gardeners of grace--- Christ's door keepers of mercy---the Holy Spirit's farmers of faith.**

**Life has its cycles, but it also has its's untimely moments.**

**We don't know how much time we have. Only God knows.**

**So, my friends, let's Spring into action!**

**It's cultivating time!**

**Amen**