

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
March 20, 2022
Year C, Lent 3
Better Questions for Times of Trouble
The Rev. Leyla King

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's been hard for a while now. But the proverbial straw for me was the imageⁱ of the dead Ukrainian family along an evacuation route. Tetiana Perebyinis, her 18-year-old son Mykyta and 9-year-old daughter Alisa, as well as Anatoly Berezhnyi, a volunteer helping them, were killed by a Russian mortar attack as they tried to flee Kyiv. The *New York Times* photographer who took the shot struggled with her decision to do so. She said: "I saw these little moon boots and puffy coat, and I just thought of my own children, of course. And I thought, 'It's disrespectful to take a photo, but I have to take a photo. This is a war crime.'"ⁱⁱ

Families are murdered in Ukraine. Two years in, we are still not in control of a global pandemic. Partisan politics and human lust for power continue to divide the country, harming most those on the margins: the poor, people of color, LGBTQ folk, and others. The list of excruciating headlines goes on and on. With hearts full of pain, fear and fury, we cry out: why?!?

It's the same question that Jesus' disciples must have asked him in the gospel lesson from Luke. Pilate had murdered a number of Jesus' countrymen, fellow Galileans, and offered their blood as part of his sacrifices to the Roman gods. The cruel actions of a bloody tyrant: something we're all familiar with today. And the folks then respond in the same way we do now – with anguish and fury and fear. They want to know *why?*

Groping for answers to that question, they land on a particularly bad one. Maybe those Galileans were so sinful in the eyes of God that God dealt out mortal punishment through Pilate.

But Jesus responds to that theory with a resounding *NO*. And the same goes for the eighteen people killed when a tower fell in Siloam. These are not judgments on the morality of the victims. That's not how God operates.

But even as Jesus rejects the answer his disciples come up with for *why* these bad things happen, he also rejects the question itself. He challenges the whole system of thought that would ask "why" in the first place.

A small book of reflections called *Held: Blessings for the Depths* begins with one author's letter to his daughter. In it, he asks his daughter to think about less-obvious questions when she finds herself in "times of trouble." "There are always other questions," he writes. "You must learn to find them, to listen for their chirruping, buzzing, hip-hopping, bebopping, hissing, achooing, aheming and blaring sounds. Slow down long enough to hear [them]... And you just might happen upon a world more alive than our deepest hopes might convey."ⁱⁱⁱ

Like Jesus, the letter-writer here pushes his audience to look for *better* questions. But seeking those better questions involves a kind of re-tuning of ourselves, to pick up new frequencies, to hear

different possibilities in the reality around us. For this process of tuning in to the world in a whole different way, Jesus uses the word that in Greek means turn around, “repent.”

When we hear “repent,” we might think about asceticism and apologies. And while that’s not wrong, being sorry for past mistakes is only the smallest part of what Jesus means when he uses that word. Rather, repentance is the process by which we completely change the way we interpret the world within and around us. It means letting go of the false insistence that *my* way is the right way and seeking instead the way of God. Repentance means letting go of the human need to be *in control* of every situation, every relationship, every crisis even, and instead accepting our limitations so that we can learn how God would have us work within them.

Because, let’s face it, if we *don’t* do that, if we refuse to repent, if we resist the re-tuning that is required of us as we confront these “times of trouble,” then we will indeed “perish,” as Jesus says. If we look at the picture of that murdered Ukrainian family and get stuck in the “why,” then we will be overcome by our fury and fear, lost in that emotional death, just as Jesus’ disciples were about the murdered Galileans.

But how do we avoid the temptation of why? How do we ask “other questions,” better questions?

Listen, says Jesus: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard...” Instead of trying to answer the unhelpful question *why*, Jesus tells a story, a parable of a gardener who counters the voice that says “give up, cut it down,” with the insistence to dig in, have patience, and hold on to the hope that good fruit is still possible.

Or, listen, says the wisdom of Exodus: when Moses saw the burning bush, he wonders “why the bush is not burned up.” But that initial question is quickly cut off by much more pressing ones, much better ones. Meeting the God of his ancestors on that holy ground, in the midst of his own people’s “time of trouble” in Egypt, Moses asks brand new questions: “Who am I... that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And then, he asks for the name of the God who speaks. When Moses “slows down long enough to hear” the other questions, instead of asking God why, he asks God *who*: Who am I? and Who are You?

And these, it turns out, are *much* more fruitful questions. They lead Moses to the knowledge of God’s presence, the “I AM” who always was, is and will be with Moses, with us, with all of God’s beloved children, in life and in death.

As we look at the broken, scary, infuriating world around us, as we struggle to carry the burdens of our own suffering and sinfulness, what if we approached the “times of trouble” we face right now with new questions? What if, confronted with images of death and destruction, heartbreak and hate, instead of asking *why*, we asked *who*? Who is the God of our salvation in whom we put our trust? And who are we as followers of that God enfleshed among us? Faced with a world of pain and anguish, who will provide strength and comfort but the incarnate one who knew our suffering so well? Amen.

ⁱ Content Warning for a very disturbing image, but you can see the photograph in this [NYT article](#)

ⁱⁱ Quote taken from [Boston.com article](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Bayo Akomolafe, “There are always other questions,” *Held: Blessings for the Depths*. M. Jade Barclay & Anna K. Blaedel, eds., 2021