

March 24, 2019 - Third Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

“The Tower Struck by Lightning” - Rev. Seth D. Jones

I want to take us what may seem very outside the Biblical and perhaps even Christian world, to the Tarot. The Tarot is a very old way of reading other people and using the cards as a kind of gateway into the deeper sensibilities that are affecting a person. I have a personal attachment to the Tarot because my great-grandmother was a Tarot reader in New York City in the early 1900s. And so I have an affinity for it. What you may not know is that many people who study the Tarot believe it is likely an encoded translation of the Christian faith designed for oppressed and downtrodden communities to have access to the teachings of Christianity. I have put the Tower card, the 16th card from the Tarot deck, on the cover of the bulletin today.

When a person pulls the Tower card in a Tarot reading, it reflects radical change. The constructs we have built up over time have collapsed through some event or action, usually from the outside. The event or action appears to be random. The Tower card should resonate towards another tower, the Tower of Babel.

The Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), if you remember, is the story of how languages were created. Before the Tower, everyone spoke the same language. The people decided to build a Tower that would reach to God. God saw this as a very present danger and destroyed the Tower, then gave everyone different tongues so that they could no longer understand each other.

Towers, then, when they show up in Tarot decks, or in ancient stories of gods and people, are always about how we make meaning. Meaning is, well, meaningless if I cannot communicate with another person; this is why we use language. The Tower of Babel is at once a story of judgment and a story of grace - it is a story of judgment because the people used their single understanding of words to lead themselves astray in meaning and perception. They created meanings, a tower, in order to be like God. This is the judgment - that the people tried to be like God.

The grace in the story is that now, with many languages, we must find meaning by learning to listen well to one another and for God. Finding meaning is about relationship, not about gaining the powers of gods. And yet, in order to find meaning, we use the most powerful force in the universe - the creative power of language.

So I propose to you today that these three stories - the one about Pilate killing people during worship, the one about an industrial accident, and the one about the fig tree - are all about how we create meaning and how meaning breaks down for people.

The first story is about *demeaning*. The act of demeaning is the act of deliberately and violently stripping the meaning a group of people give to a particular idea or act. Demeaning someone, stripping out the meaning of what they value, works best when we attack directly something we actually define ourselves by - if you want to demean Muslims, you attack mosques and Islam. If you want to demean Christians, you attack churches and Christianity. If you want to demean Hindus, you attack temples and mock their gods.

Luke tells a story about how Pilate sent his soldiers into the Temple and killed some people while they were worshiping. The blood of the slain mixed with the blood of the sacrifices which were being made. This is considered to be an abomination that condemns those who have died.

The question Jesus asks is, “*Do you think they were greater sinners than you all because they died that way?*” It is likely the gathered people did think this. Even today, it is a common idea to attribute bad things that happen to people to those people being bad people. In other words, they must have done something to deserve the punishment that came upon them.

Jesus flatly denies this, and holds it up for the outrageous statement it is. To suggest the people died because of who they were diverts the sole responsibility of the attack from Pilate and the Roman Empire to the people who suffered. We saw this last week with some politicians and TV preachers who suggested the Muslims who died while worshiping in New Zealand died because they deserved it. It sounds as bad today as it did to Jesus 2000 years ago. An act which is meant to demean the people killed, the people who identify with them, and the people who bear witness succeeds when we participate in that kind of thinking. By their actions, the shooters in New Zealand at the mosque, the shooter in South Carolina at the church, the shooter in Milwaukee at the Sikh Temple, and Pilate in the Temple in Jerusalem all sought to demean the people gathered and what they believed. They were acts designed to demean people in the most literal sense : destroy meaning and the people who create that meaning. We seem to be surrounded by acts of “*de-meaning*” today.

The second story is about the Tower that fell and killed 18 people in Saloam. This is an event that is *meaningless*. Meaningless events are random, chaotic, accidental. In this case, the tower that fell was likely a part of the aqueduct that Herod was obsessed with building in the area. The people who died were probably workers. It was an industrial accident, and just like industrial accidents today, they are truly meaningless, chaotic, random. Another example would be people who die in a flash flood, like the many who died in Mozambique during the typhoon this past week, or the floods and massive losses experienced in Kansas and Iowa last week. As opposed to acts which *demean*, these events create a growing sense of meaningless.

And then there's the story of the fig tree that seems to be representative of *time making things meaningless*, or rather the usefulness that gives a person or thing meaning becomes useless and therefore meaningless. The fig tree isn't producing. The owner of the field wants the gardener to dig up the tree and kill it. It is a useless tree, the owner says. It is using up valuable nutrients from the soil. It is not doing what a fig tree is supposed to do. The gardener says "*let's give it a year. Let me work with it and spread manure around it and see if we can help it. Then, if it is still a meaningless fig tree, we can get rid of it.*" The fig tree's meaninglessness comes from the fact that it's not fulfilling its purpose. Time has made the meaninglessness and uselessness of the tree clear; the gardener says time will possibly make the tree blossom, and therefore meaningful and useful. By the way, the fig tree is sometimes used as a symbol of Jerusalem.

For the act which *demeans*, and for the event that is *meaningless*, Jesus says that unless you repent you will likewise perish - your life will have no meaning. It is such a strange thing to say after these stories. To perish without meaning makes us like the fig tree. We have not fulfilled our purpose, we have not entered into the life that is meant for us. The things that give meaning to our lives, then, require some awareness and attention on our part.

In the image of the Tower struck by lightning, how have we built up meanings in our lives that do not help ourselves and others thrive? Because thriving is the opposite of perishing, and as we learned last week, God wants for us is to thrive.

Jesus seems to suggest two things about things that demean, that are meaningless, and things that lose their meaning over time. **First**, we cannot draw conclusions about other people based on the meaning we have created for ourselves. This is how we build towers to God. And **second**, we must repent in order to find meaning. Or rather, *meaning is only available to us once we repent, once we turn around, once we see differently*. And there is a scary corollary to all of this repentance talk as well, which comes from the fig tree - the meaning we seek is not always available. There is a time when, if we do not live into the will and purpose of God, that God's meaning and will for us will no longer be accessible.

Repentance is a confrontation of the past as we have been and the new purpose as we could be in the eyes of God. Jesus' conversation suggests that Jesus himself is the source of repentance, meaning, and thriving. We are habituated into reading a text like this as saying, "*I have to do all this. I have to repent. I have to change.*" But perhaps the problem isn't what we have to do. Perhaps the problem is that we don't recognize what has already been done to and for us.

Perhaps it is Jesus' very presence that creates repentance. We have been turned around already by Jesus' work for us. Jesus, by his mere arrival upon this earth, changes us. How much more so are we changed by being baptized like Jesus in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This turns repentance into a state of being rather than an action or continual bending of the will. Our response, instead of doing things, is

recognition, awareness, and remembering that we, the baptized and welcomed children of God, are people of repentance, people who have been forgiven, people who know the source of all meaning comes from God and God alone. This is why Jesus tells us continually to wake up. Live into what you already are.

Robert Hawker, a British minister in the early 1800s, put it this way: “*Hence, as this is God’s work and not man’s, and repentance is but an effect of this work, and not the cause, it never was meant, neither could it be expected, as a means of bringing sinners into a salvable state, but rather an evidence of their being brought...*”¹

We have already been carried to the Lord. We do not come to the Lord. Meaning, then, is found in the continual turning towards what God desires for us, and what God has already provided for us.

As we head toward the cross, it becomes increasingly clear that the one thing that erases meaning more than anything else is death. Jesus calls us to continually confront actions which demean, events which are meaningless, and the dissolution of meaning and purpose over time. We confront all those things with a continual return, turning around, repentance to the source of meaning itself, which is God. And this is where meaning thrives.

And what does thriving look like? It looks like Isaiah 55:

*Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.*

Come and join the community in God’s image. We cannot access the meaning by trying to understand God; we find meaning by joining God. Isaiah makes it pretty clear trying to understand God is a fool’s errand. Isaiah 55:8 says,

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways*

¹ from Hawker’s Commentary, found at <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/pmc/luke-13.html>. Accessed 3/21/19.

and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Jesus tells the people today that the tower of meaning as it has been constructed has collapsed. Everyone who has heard this word has drawn the Tower card from the Tarot deck. The way we used to make meaning in our world has changed. It is no longer about demeaning people who have been demeaned. It is no longer about finding meaning in meaningless events. And it is no longer about determining whether the purpose of a person or thing has become meaningless because, over time, they haven't produced in the way they were supposed to. The world as we have understood it has collapsed.

And in that collapse of the Tower belief won't help you. Faith may or may not depending on how stable your faith is, but it often isn't stable. Community may or may not help you depending on how tuned in they are to your suffering, and often they aren't.

So what are we to do? Where does meaning come from if we can't just create it from our personal desires and whims?

I think Jesus does a daring thing here. From the parable of the fig tree, Jesus is asking us to do the one thing Scripture always reminds us about our relationship with God. If our relationship were all about belief and faith, we would see people coming back to God with right thinking and right beliefs. But that is not the story of Scripture. People don't do that in the Bible. If our relationship with God were all about community, we would see communities doing the right things and following God in the right ways. But that also is not the story of Scripture. More often than not, communities resist, rebel, and kick themselves away from God.

The only theme from which meaning blossoms in Scripture is **trusting God**. Trust is the great teaching of Lent all the way through Good Friday. If the teaching were about faith, Peter would never have denied Christ. Peter doesn't have faith; he finally trusts. If Scripture were about belief, the disciples on the road to Emmaus would never have needed to have a conversation with the stranger. Theirs is a story of unbelief.

But if the story is about trust, then what people in Scripture and today are doing makes sense. Trusting in God means we can't build towers of meaning built on egos and self to the Lord. Meaning is not because of my excellent theology, or yours. Instead, we trust in the Christ with whom we have shared baptism. We trust in the Lord who has brought us to this way, this mystery, even if we don't understand this way. Meaning, in the Christian sense, means trust and humility.

Demeaning things still happen. Meaningless events always take place. Our purpose or the meaning of what we were meant to do is always a collapsing wave form of more and more and less and less meaning. The towers of meaning we create will always fall again. But those are not where meaning is found. Trusting the God who gives us life, who builds us up, and who develops us over time is where meaning is found.

Now, the Tower Struck By Lightning becomes the opportunity to let God give us the meaning we seek, rather than relying on empires, governors, presidents, politics, signs and portents, time itself for meaning.

Can we trust the meaning God is bringing to us today?

Live in a state of repentance and trust the Lord.

*⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;*

*⁷ let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

Amen.