

3rd Sunday of Lent

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You made it! You've achieved your life-long dream and have finally made it as a contestant on Jeopardy! Not only have you made it, but you're only one question away from being the show's champion. The final category is "Sins of the Bible". You smile, having taken a few masters degree level classes on the Old and New Testament. You make your wager and wait for the answer, anxious to write the correct question that will solve more than just a few of your financial problems. In true Jeopardy style the answer flashes on the screen: "The one sin of people in ancient times that was believed to be the leading cause of death and destruction, found frequently in the book of Exodus." If *you* were to guess what the most common *sin* that people made in the books of Holy Scripture was, what would you write as your answer? Be quick about it, 20 or 30 seconds go by fast, especially when a catchy little tune is being played along in the background. Where would your thoughts take you?

Whether we think about it or not, we live out this kind of scenario day after day. While I truly doubt that many of us really look at situations in life as a game show question, there's always that inner child in us that enjoys a break from the mundane. I often wonder what it would be like to make it on that show and take a stab at winning a few dollars. Going back to that answer that is a question asking for a question that is an answer, have you been thinking about what you would write on your screen? And what would your answer be if the question had been asked shortly after reading today's lessons?

On the surface it appears we have several themes presented to us. Moses questions God as to why *he* has been chosen and tries to plead ignorance in order

to avoid his duties – his pleading is dismissed. Is it a sin to question God? We were told the last couple weeks that it was a sin to *test* the Lord! And definitely one to grieve the Holy Spirit! But questioning God ... I've often felt that it's not my place to question divine direction but yet we find it happening time and time again from all of the prophets. Some moan and drag their feet more than others, but they do it. Even some, like in the case of Ezekiel aren't even given a choice. They're plucked up by the hair and teleported right to the spot they're needed most. The Holy Spirit is, after all, the first true teleporter. Long before Gene Rodenberry was writing the script for Capt. Kirk to say "Beam me up, Scotty" God was doing things as only God can do to move people from place to place. And as far as it goes arguing with God about why things happen, we can never say enough about how frequently Moses and the other prophets pleaded not to have to carry out Holy Orders. And yes, they did convince God to change his mind on occasion.

Where do we see particular sins in Paul's dealing with Corinth? What about isolation and individualism as a sin? Is it wrong to segregate yourself from others for the sake of keeping within a particular culture or religion? The Hebrews did it, and of course Christians still do it. What is different about the way things are happening in Corinth compared to what other Christian Communities around the Mediterranean Sea are doing? If these examples *are* sins, is punishment being dealt out accordingly? What does God do when considering the punishment for particular sins? The letter to Corinth points toward Luke's gospel to find that people were thought to have been killed because of the acts they committed! What is the Gospel trying to tell us this Sunday, halfway through Lent? Surely it can't be that certain people are singled out for their transgressions by being

wiped off the face of the earth! And what of the way others seem to get a free pass to try and get it right another day?

All of these questions – or are they answers - wind up with Jesus telling us a story about a fig tree. There must be some correlation to why punishment is given in such varied degrees but before we dive into that further, let me just say this: If God meted out justice based on every sin every person ever committed there wouldn't be anyone left on earth. Yes, there are some who think earthquakes, volcanos, tsunamis, disease, and other natural disasters are sent by God to punish the human race's inability to remain free from error. If that were the case, *WE* would not exist. The entire species would have been eliminated before the second or third generation from Adam and Eve's family. It's the same no matter when and where humans existed on this planet, one thing we all have in common is that we are all subject to the same laws of nature and the universe. A tornado that rips through a small village in mid-February killing a mother, daughter and family pets wasn't created and put in motion because of how they lived their lives any more or less than the reason the town's other eleven hundred people's lives were spared.

Consider Luke telling us of the tower that fell on the people at Siloam or how Pilate initiated the bloody actions on Christians that were said to be mingled with pagan sacrifices. There will always be those whose first reaction to horrific events is "What did they do wrong to deserve that!?!?" If we fail to go any deeper into the stories than the superficial reading we often do just to skim over a passage to get through it, that is the exact type of question we might have to our Jeopardy answer. Ah, yes, the game show we started at the beginning of this

talk! Does the sin you first thought about still fit? Answering in the form of a question did you ask; what is “murder” or “greed” or “hatred” or another one of the ten commandments, or any one of the seven deadly sins? Surely one of those would be a good bet on us winning the final round to become the next returning champion. But ... if we look to isolate a particular wrong-doing as the cause of all of these biblical deaths we have no chance of being a true champion.

I think the key to the answer here; or question; is both correcting an ego that has taken over our lives - and a lack of faith that produces bad decisions. If our ego is in charge, our faith will be on a superficial level that has no foundation. An ego that won't allow us to get to the root of a problem and repent – won't allow us to turn away and make that change for the better – will turn even the most constructive tool into an idol. That is my view of the errors and sins that seem to have led to death and destruction. It's not that we turned off of the right path by making an honest and humble mistake. The error is in turning an arts and crafts project into a golden calf. The error is in taking God's generosity of giving us manna and meat from heaven and then cursing the very thing we asked for by wishing we had never departed on a journey. Even the freedom to choose can be made an idol. The error of Corinth was in thinking they were the only ones who had a market on salvation and wouldn't share the wealth, so to speak. Corinth mistook their prosperity and good fortune as something owed them and denied to share with others, making an idol of success.

So did you win? How many of you had your Jeopardy question phrased: “What is idolatry?” Turns out that the sin that will kill is the sin that places something ahead of God. Death comes about when we place heavenly value on

material wealth. We're not told to rid ourselves of the things that are worth money or time or have some other intrinsic value. We need money to buy food and pay for shelter and transportation. We're told not to place our trust and faith in those items and make them the objects of our worship.

Finally, what about that fig tree that wasn't producing? Seems only natural to cut it down. Why waste space when there are so many other options? Is the space it took up also an idol? Could be. Let's decipher the story of the fig tree. In the Hebrew scripture figs, fig trees, and being under a fig tree represents how far someone has traveled on the spiritual journey. If you're seen sitting under a fig tree, you are seen as someone whose senses toward the spiritual and mystical levels are awake and acute. Manure represents humility. Adding manure to the tree means we are trying to increase an awareness by stripping off the ego with large doses of humility. Notice these doses of humility are added for a specific amount of time. This tree, this soul then, once void of any type of spiritual awareness is going to be given special care by the gardener (I wonder who that could be?) ... and given one more chance to see if that ego can be tamed, before being severed from the group.

See, we all have second chances. Some of us third and fourth chances. Because I don't believe that God cuts us off from life for one sin, whatever that might be. We can change and we are given the tools to make those changes for the better. That is one of the reasons we go through Lent, to search ourselves and weed out the thoughts and notions that turn the ordinary into idolatry. We are to take the extra time to tend to the areas of our lives that are void of love, peace, and not in true harmony with all of creation. So look for and find a better

way, a different way, and learn to recognize when we are being humbled. May we continue to stay faithful, stay alert, and stay true to the one Being who will reward us with items of far better value than any object we find on this earth. And at the end of these 40 days of nurturing our own tree, may we be blessed with an abundance of figs on the day of the resurrection. Amen.