

March 24, 2019  
St. Luke's, Blackstone, VA  
Third Sunday in Lent (RCL/C)  
A Lenten Meditation by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

For most of us having a sense of hope in our lives is a primary foundation of our Christian faith. This is particularly so when our lives and the lives of those around us go awry, get out of balance and are in downright darkness.

Yet, most of us go through life being very comfortable about our beliefs and theories about our Christian faith. Then one day, somewhat "out of the blue," something happens to make us question those beliefs. Our lives are turned upside down; our beliefs and theories to boot. It is as though we enter a dark tunnel, a tunnel of our stark reality; a tunnel of darkness where we engage in a life changing and altering experience. When we come out the other end of that tunnel we often find that our faith in God and in others around us is shaken to its core. When this happens hope is a necessity, a necessity that may be hard to find.

A crucial component of hope that's important to many of us is the availability of a second chance in life. Hope becomes real when we are given, and when we give, second chances in life. We need second chances, because at one time or another all of us, and I do mean "all of us" make a mess of our lives and the lives of those who are close to us.

In the scriptures this morning we heard how the despotic and cruel ruler Pilate killed a group of innocent Galileans as they were worshipping in the synagogue. Then, as if that was not enough, we heard about the Tower of Siloam which fell upon and killed another group of innocent bystanders. Jesus, in an almost sweeping statement, reminds the people that life is precious and sometimes short. Jesus intimates that there is no time like the present to consider our relationship to God; a relationship that's very much connected to the confession of our sins, our repentance or sorrow for those sins, and receiving God's ever available forgiveness.

When it comes to the calamities in our world today, the phenomena of the instantaneous 24-hour news cycle enables us to know far more that is happening on this planet, even on the other side of the globe, than we humans have ever before known.

Just in the past week as a culture we heard and read about the effects of floods in the upper Midwest. We know how a gunman in New Zealand took the lives 50 unsuspecting people in a place of worship. We know about a situation where all lives were lost in Africa aboard a commercial airliner.

As individuals and as families we have our own share of tragedies. Yet, at the same time during this season of Lent we are being encouraged to confront the stark realities

of life. The good news is that we can confront that stark reality with the stubbornness of Godly hope.

Going back to the Gospel story this morning, Jesus tells all who would listen to him a story about gardening and agriculture. According to the story for three years there was a fig tree that wouldn't produce any figs. The owner of the garden in which the fig tree was planted intended to cut down the barren fig tree. Yet, just then the gardener came along and asked the owner if he could have another chance to water and fertilize the tree to nurture it back to life. The owner concurred with the gardener and gave him one year to get the fig tree back on track so that it could produce the fruit it should have been producing. In both agriculture and in the lives of God's people gardeners play an important role..

Have you ever noticed that at times in life a seemingly chance encounter will leave you connected with someone for the rest of your life. Some years ago I had such a connection. In the course of my ministry I met a man, whom I will call John. Through a lapse of good judgement John made a significant mistake in his life. For his mistake John was arrested, tried in a court of law, convicted and sent to prison. For three years every four weeks I drove 5 hours one-way to visit with John. For some time, early on during those visits when I would try to talk about the future with John he would stop me and ask if we could talk about something else. Finally I asked John why he did not want to talk about the future. He replied that he didn't think he had a future; that for the rest of his life all he could ever be to his former wife, to his children, and to his friends would be a convicted felon – an ex-con. When I left the prison that day I contacted some of John's old friends and told them what John had said. Then and there his friends made the commitment that they would do everything in their power to give John a second chance in life; to get his future back. Through the dedication of their time, talent and treasure the friends went to work for John. Today John is living in another country, has a good job with a steady income, is about to remarry, is rebuilding his relationship with his children and has a solid relationship with Christ.

Though I didn't think much about it at the time, John's friends were living out the story of the Gospel lesson for today when the gardener told the land-owner that he would tend to the non-producing fig tree to give it a second chance. They were John's gardeners who tended to his needs until he could bear some fruit. For John, they were the embodiment of hope that led to his future..

Jesus is the embodiment of the second chance. In order for the second chance to become alive and real, God asks us to repent of our sins. Like the gardener in the story, God tends and cultivates our lives so that the fruit of hope can be born within each of us and shared with God's people.

Repentance is always in season, but especially repentance is in season during Lent. The earliest Christians believed that in baptism they were joined to the life of Christ, and their sins were forgiven. Serious sin led to a separation from the community. In the second-century spiritual book "The Shepherd of Hermas" the author writes about

persons who sinned were allowed a second chance. For them, as for my former prisoner John, this was their new start in life.<sup>1</sup>

Frederica Matthewes-Green has for many years has written about Christian spirituality. In her book *The Illumined Heart* she describes repentance as the primary doorway to the spiritual life. In fact, she writes that repentance is the only way to begin and stay on a spiritual path that leads to God in Christ. She goes on to state that anything else is foolishness and self-delusion. Only repentance is both honest enough and joyous enough to bring us all the way home to our Lord.<sup>2</sup>

This morning we are going to have the opportunity to renew our baptismal vows. I believe that during this contemplative and reflective season of Lent this is one way to center ourselves both in the stark reality of who we are and in the stubbornness of the hope which the Holy Spirit cultivates our lives.

Shortly I would like for us to maintain a period of silence. I am going to give you a statement on which I would like for you to think and reflect. If you are like most of us, your mind will wander. When it does, acknowledge where your attention is going and then come back to the statement I have given you. Some of you will want to close your eyes and get in a relaxed seated position. Others of you will want to have your eyes open. Perhaps some of you may want to kneel. That too is okay. After a few minutes I will bring you all back as we continue with the renewal of our baptism vows.

The statement is this: remember that you are Gods, and some day to God you will return. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Third Book: Similitudes Seventh Similitude "They who repent must bring forth fruits worthy of repentance." <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02013.htm> accessed 190222.

<sup>2</sup> Frederica Matthewes-Green, *The Illumined Heart* (Touchstone, 2002).  
[frederica.com/writings/repentance-both-door-and-path.html](http://frederica.com/writings/repentance-both-door-and-path.html)