

Year C, Lent III
March 24, 2019
The Rev. Fred Devall

Lisa and I are fortunate in a way most people would not claim- our vocations require a constant encounter with death. For anyone who is not aware, Lisa is a Registered Nurse. After more than two decades as a medical/surgical floor nurse, she moved into a different role as that of Case Manager. Meaning her job is to coordinate your care after you leave the hospital. Sometimes the care you receive after hospitalization is temporary to help you get back on your feet. Other times it is for home hospice, and sadly, sometimes people do not make it out of the hospital. Does the manner of death reflect one's relationship with the Almighty? Of course not, but old habits die hard.

When Julie Couvillon, a 36 year-old nurse, was killed by a stray bullet, I overheard people at the gym talking about her death, and they had a not so kind outlook, one that casts a lot of suspicion on her, the innocent by-stander. "What was she doing down there anyway at that time of night?" We aren't always as far along as we think.

In Jesus' day, illness and certain kinds of sudden death were believed to be reflective of one's sinfulness. Jesus preached against such foolishness, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?...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?" (Luke 13:2-4).

Sudden death could happen to any of us at any time; that much is certain, but your state of readiness should not be left to chance. Maybe you will live long enough to make a deathbed confession and get right with God; or perhaps tragedy will strike and that hoped for time will not then be available. What then?

I've never thought myself much of a fire and brimstone kind of preacher but have been fascinated by them, that is the ones who carry signs like you might see at a football game, "John 3:16"; not so much the ones with hateful messages about who God does and does not love. Back to the visual preachers, especially the sandwich board carrying guys. In seminary I met such a man at the foot of the Washington Monument in D. C. He could have easily fit into our congregation, save for the warning signs he was carrying on his chest and back. Thankfully, he was not a screamer, or for that matter, even vocal. He simply witnessed by his signs warning us to repent.

I actually sat and talked with him for a good while, asking how it was he came to be a prophet of sorts. He explained that it came through a powerful he encounter he had with God, his own sort of burning bush moment. He wanted others to know there was a different way to live, one accessible through repentance. He never revealed what it is he repented of, but I was able to piece together a fuzzy sketch of his life from the conversation. He had been a power-player executive living high on the hog by separating other people from their money. During his mid-

fifties, something changed. He began to recognize his own mortality and the fact that he lived in a perpetual gray area with regards to the ethics of his business practices. Then he had a powerful dream, a burning bush moment, where he recognized God's holiness and his own sinfulness. He responded by changing his business practices *and* coming to the Washington Monument on weekends with his sandwich board sign. By the time I met him, he was an old man. No longer able to drive himself, his daughter would drop him off. Yes, it was highly embarrassing to her that someone of her social status had a father who would witness his faith so publicly, but thankfully she made her peace with her dad.

The takeaway for me was not his focus on the hellfire and brimstone that awaited the non-repentant. The attraction was rather on the readily available grace of God that would ensure a perpetual communion with God. Such grace was available *now*, to anyone who would access it, but it was not something that would be available for ever. Hence the signs; take God's grace now. It's the best deal you that will ever be offered.

Jesus addressed the concept through his 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'" (Luke 13:6-9).

As I stated, I'm not much for hellfire and brimstone, but I share in the belief that the way we live in this life matters. How it matters will ultimately be determined at Judgment Day. There is another wrinkle to it. We know repenting today will make your life better tomorrow; that much is promised, but it will also make your life immensely better today. *Amen.*