

## **SHORT, BUT NOT NASTY AND BRUTISH**

*Sermon for Lent 3C: Lk 13:1-9*

LPC, 3/7/10

Arlington, Virginia, was a strange place to be on September 11, 2001 and in the weeks immediately following. In the aftermath of the Pentagon explosion, people were dazed, uncomprehending. I don't think anyone was more than one handshake removed from someone who was at the Pentagon on that dreadful day. Everyone seemed to at least know someone who knew someone who was killed or immediately affected.

All at once life seemed more dangerous. Even after crews had covered the massive damage to Pentagon's façade, which was painfully visible to thousands of DC commuters, we had daily reminders of abiding danger. Commutes were rerouted to avoid the areas deemed most perilous. Trash cans were removed from public places. You couldn't go see the dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum without having to empty your purse. You still can't.

Gradually people adjusted to what was called "the New Normal." But their perception of safety never quite went back to what it had been before.

Were things really more dangerous after 9-11 than before? Or was it just our perception of danger that increased? I suspect the latter. In other words, life is always dangerous. Death is always a heartbeat away. Human beings don't like to acknowledge this, and indeed most of us can't function with this knowledge always at the forefront of our consciousness.

For the most part, in the absence of something like 9-11, we don't *have* to think about death. The relative high quality of diet and disease control in this time and place, plus other factors like the relative peace and civil order most of us enjoy, enable us to keep the ever-present reality of death from intruding into our happiness. Individuals among us must face terminal disease, and all of us experience grief when someone we know dies, but it takes a catastrophe like 9-11, or a tsunami or earthquake, to alert everyone to the inherent uncertainty of life. When everyone around you is alert to death at the same time, death's reality is harder to avoid.

If the avoidance of thinking about death is important to you, don't read the Bible, and don't come to church. The writers of the Bible were acutely aware of the ever-present reality of death. Jesus speaks of death often.

Today's lesson from Luke is a case in point. People have asked Jesus about some Galileans who were slaughtered by Roman troops while they were at worship, offering sacrifices to God. That is why the text so colorfully says that their blood mingled with that of their sacrifices. The implication of the question is: didn't these people get what they deserved? In other words, the questioners are assuming that the fact that these Galileans died so gruesomely must mean that they were bad, that they deserved this

death. The questioners are assuming God's justice means that God causes bad people to die. If they weren't bad, according to this reasoning, they wouldn't have died.

Jesus says no. These people were no worse than you or I. But life is dangerous. Random violence occurs. Walls fall on people. Being good is no assurance that you won't die. Everybody dies. Life is short.

This discussion occurs in the context of Jesus teaching that the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment, could come any time. Jesus wants his listeners to know that the uncertainty of the Day of Judgment means that people have to be ready. Every day counts. No one must put off doing right by God and neighbor, because there may be no tomorrow. Life is short.

The idea that life is short is unfashionable now, but thinking people have always grappled with the transience and uncertainty of life. Philosopher Thomas Hobbes, during the English Civil War, famously wrote that in the absence of a social contract between persons, life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

(Parenthetically, I love this phrase. "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" sounds like a law firm, doesn't it? It also describes a date I had in college.)

But back to Hobbes, and Jesus: Hobbes and Jesus agree that life is short, but they have different purposes in pointing this out. Hobbes is defending strong central government, which protects people from brutish life and sudden death. Jesus is talking about a way to live these few, uncertain days we have to live.

Jesus preaches a life sweetened by repentance. Life is short, but it doesn't have to be nasty and brutish. We cannot control the capriciousness of despotic rulers, random violence and the vagaries of nature, but we can, with God's help, control our own nastiness and brutishness. And when we slip up and act nasty and brutish, we can repent.

For the record, here is what repentance means: turning to God, as Moses turned to the burning bush; admitting our nastiness and brutishness; AND accepting the deliverance of God. A lot of us avoid repentance and confession because we don't take the time for the last step: accepting God's deliverance. We need to take the time to do this. But we have no time to waste. Life is short. Therefore, life is precious.

The good news is, God's deliverance is at hand.