My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten repentant Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

A teenager has had a rough few years. First came an arrest for shoplifting. The item was of little value, so it was only a misdemeanour. Then the teen was with some friends who were smoking pot and driving too fast. But then the teen has promised they are turning over a new leaf and seem to be on the right track, doing better in school, coming home by curfew, and generally having a much better attitude. But then a call comes in from the local police station saying the teen was with a group of who were robbing someone when a gun went off. The teen is in the hospital, and it’s uncertain whether they will ever be the same again due to the injuries they sustained. The others in the group were never caught.

Is the teen a perpetrator of their own fate, or the victim of circumstances? What reactions do we have to this story? (take all answers).

Does it matter that we hear this story in Greenland, or would it make a difference if we heard this story in a setting where scuffles with the law are more common? What are your assumptions about the teen’s education, race, family situation, or gender? What assumptions have we made in our hearts and minds around this story, even though none of those details were ever given?

When people suffer, we rush to name reasons for their suffering. Especially if those suffering are folks we know and love. Our anxiety levels are high, so we try and explain away things as preparation for greater blessing and we minimize the pain so as to make way for God’s glory, as if that will somehow take the pain away. What’s the reason for this teen’s injuries in the story we just told? What is the reason for the inexplicable?

“There’s a reason for everything”, well meaning folks say in the event of the death of a loved one. It’s an almost instinctual reflex. We can’t seem to help it. Why do we so quickly try to quiet our rational minds that seek order in our world, rather than sit down and hold the heart that cries a river of tears and cannot stop?

Maybe it’s because the world is complicated and too difficult to explain. We sweep away pain in the lives of our loved ones and friends because we find it too hard to simply hold onto uncertainty. We seek connection and cause and effect to fill in the gaps. And those gaps are yawing and wide when it comes to sickness and death. There must be a reason for why bad things happen to good people, as if we had a list of rules that could make our lives so orderly as to never ourselves suffer from sickness and death.

So we come back to the question: why do we do this to ourselves and others? Maybe it’s because we know deep down that eventually we, too, will be the ones who are suffering rather than looking on and giving cold comfort with a pithy saying about God’s plan. Grandma would say, “into every life a little rain must fall”.

But Jesus says that God does not intend suffering and death to be instructive in the Kingdom. Sure, it will come for us all, eventually. But it cannot ***over***come us, unless we let it. The point of the scripture today is that none deserve death. God promises one more chance.

There’s a fig tree that has been planted to no avail. No blooms. No fruit. The soil should be free to host more productive roots than *this* plant. Did we see that in the teen in our story earlier? Our sensibilities say to pull up the fruitless tree. But a gardener comes around and says there is yet hope. Just one more year of nurture, let’s see what happens.

Like many of Jesus’ parables, there is no epilogue. We don’t know what happened the next year. Did the tree blossom? Or was it cut down? We don’t know.

Where do we see ourselves in the story? As the person who planted the tree? If that were true, we would see no more life here. Might as well move on. All we do see is what others lack, not the abundance of life and hope and pain and distress that they’re experiencing. We see waste, not possibilities. We see loss, not rebound and resilience. Some of us see ourselves as the fig tree. Maybe we see ourselves as fruitless, hopeless, lifeless.

But the gardener never gives up. We are given more possibility where others see impossibility.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

This is tough stuff. In theology circles, it’s called “theodicy”, or seeing divine goodness and providence in the existence of suffering or evil. But let’s consider this—what if our Spirit took our instinct to explain, or order things like books on a shelf but which won’t bear being ordered by size, or color, or subject, or author—and redirected it?

Random, tragic events still occur. But we are a fig tree, given one more chance despite years of never having borne fruit. We’re waiting God to cultivate us and nurture us into a flowering tree. We have been chosen to blossom through our becoming certain about uncertainty. That it’s OK after all.

What if the Spirit can help us realize there is no order to the chaos of suffering, but God’s grace can find a way through to give us comfort? Not stillness, but comfort, like we talked about last Wednesday night.

Turning our hearts around, or repentance, is not a trade off with God. It’s faith saying that our deepest hopes and fears can find a place that we can put them. What if the Spirit can help us shift our instincts to compassion and empathy? When we encounter suffering, our first gesture might be to sit alongside the fig tree we see, and say that in the ashes of their grief, that there is yet more to nurture, and that fruit will come again. Just not this year.

And for that deep reckoning of pain and sorrows, for that place that only God can take me to, I am grateful, and thankful, this and each day. Amen.