

Third Day Story

Scripture text: Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

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Center Church on the Green, February 28, 2021



You might have heard a big fuss over the past week about something that was happening about 135 million miles from wherever you are sitting today. Last week, in a maneuver described by the engineers who designed it as “seven minutes of terror,” NASA let down a cable from a skyhook about 100 feet in the air and deposited the roving exploration vehicle Perseverance gently onto the surface of the planet Mars.

There were images of shouts and dancing and more than a few tears from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory control room where the mission has been monitored since last July. The engineers had done their best to design a robotic lander that could overcome all the hazards of a Mars landing, but they had no direct control over what was going on because radio waves at the speed of light take nearly 9 minutes to arrive on Earth.

So drawings and animations and the faces in the control room were about all we really knew about Perseverance’s arrival in the first few hours after its landing.

There's no high-speed Internet between Mars and Earth, so it took time to gather images of the landing and what the rover could see from its new home base. That's why it was a couple of days before we saw these spectacular videos and heard the sound of the thin Martian atmosphere whistling past the rover's microphones. I grew up with the stark images of the lunar landing a generation ago—dust and infinitely black galactic starscapes overarching the airless moonscape.

I was not expecting to see a parachute billowing. I was certainly not expecting to see a sky with clouds and light across the horizon. The images and the sounds helped me reach a new understanding of the Martian landscape in a way the breaking story of the landing did not.

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Nuance and understanding do not flow from the first little flashes of what we call “breaking news.” The “new” in “news” is a quality that takes time to assimilate. New ideas like Mars having a sky take time to soak in and water the soil of our consciousness.

Print media—you know, old-fashioned newspapers—have some ways to frame their coverage. Those ways have been blurred by online media and broadcast media—you know, Web sites and apps and cable news networks—where everything for the past four

years was a breaking story. But the categories in newspaper work are pretty clear.

The front page headlines are what we think of as “news”—stuff that has just emerged and we should know about, even if the details are not clear. A “second day story” fills in the details. It adds what was not known in the heat of breaking the story, and how people affected by the story have reacted to it.

Print journalism also has a “third day story.” It may rely on details from reporters, but it is often written by an experienced analyst. A third day story is about what it means for this thing to have happened. It brings in history, and opinions from experts on the subject, and maybe even some guesses about how things are going to change now that this thing has happened.

A third day story makes sense of chaos. It leads us to look beneath the surface of what happened, to get beyond the news of the moment. It is an invitation to go deeper.

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Going deeper...getting past the news of the moment...that’s the message in today’s stories from Luke.

Just imagine the breathless burden of the people who are carrying news of a horrifying event to Jesus. Any Jewish person hearing of a human massacre taking place during the holy ritual of

animal sacrifice would be shocked on a level that did not require any thought. All the news-bearers could think of at that moment was to tell Jesus what had happened...maybe as a warning, maybe because they were relieved it hadn't happened to them.

Andddd...Jesus turns the story on its head. The Galileans hadn't been any better or any worse than anyone else. Their misfortune did not excuse anyone else from seeking a changed life. Andddd...then Jesus tops their story, with a fresh account of a horrible construction accident in the big city. What happened to the workers was not punishment for being somehow worse than other Jerusalem dwellers.

Having dealt with the second day details, Jesus offers a third day story. It's not about worshippers massacred in the Temple, or steeplejacks crushed by their work. It's about an apple tree. It's about a calm gardener who encourages an impatient householder to give the apple tree one more chance to bear fruit, with care and nurture, before giving up.

The story stops the crowd cold. It does not invite hyperventilation, or fear, or jumping to conclusions about who is behaving badly and deserves a stark dose of fate. It's about an apple tree. And a gardener. And it's about the nurture and care that will be offered the tree, and the reward that awaits the appearance of

apples on its branches. And it's about the reality that one cannot force a tree to bear fruit, and that it's reasonable to turn one's attention elsewhere if the tree won't bear apples.

Not even Pharisees delivering another harum-scarum message can shake the crowd at this point. Jesus has work today and work tomorrow, and on the third day you can look forward to his wrap-up. It takes courage to tell a story in the wake of breaking news. It takes compassion to move beyond current events in pursuit of deeper meaning.

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It takes that kind of courage even today. In this sea of breaking news we've been reacting over and over and over again. As members of a church community, a community of faith, Jesus invites us to go deeper.

Communities like this one, like our church, always live in a certain tension. Through our response to God's invitation, we see ourselves as being on a path, journeying in faith, and understanding the events of our lives through the lens of the Bible and the workings of God's Holy Spirit within us. Pulling at us, and often in a completely different direction, is the society in which we live. Just when we think we understand God's desire for our lives, there's breaking news! Someone has proclaimed that faith is

obsolete, or superstitious! We don't need the church any more!

Details at 11!

But your congregation...the wider church...communities of faith the world over...offer two things that are very much needed. Your congregation offers perspective on breaking events, a way to understand them in relation to how Jesus teaches us to live. And, your church offers space to continue your faith journey. You have friends in Christ who can help you talk it out, work it out, live it out.

When Jesus turns toward Jerusalem in today's story, there is a trail of footsteps behind him. And that trail, that path, has been followed by innumerable pilgrims in the years since his life on earth. It is a trail that he invites you to follow. It is a path toward a life with meaning and purpose and a mission. It is the gift of life in Jesus that God offers for your use.

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We will always have the news of the moment around us. In that swirl, Jesus invites us to follow him deeper than the headlines. As we walk with him may our understanding of our mission deepen as well.

May your walk with Jesus be a blessing to you and to those you meet in the days ahead. Amen.