

The best laid plans of mice and men

Mark 3:20-35

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

As we live, things go wrong. They seem to go wrong no matter what. Today the Scripture lessons indicate something about the problem of original sin. What is that about? Well, things go wrong, and no matter what we do, bad things happen. It's inevitable. You drive along, and a bird doesn't fly fast enough in front of you, and you hit it. We'd like not to hit it, but we do.

Long ago, in 1785, Robert Burns wrote a poem, "To a Mouse." It's about how he was plowing a field in November and accidentally unearthed the nest of a mouse, leaving the nest in ruin and throwing the mouse out into the cold wind. That poem includes the famous line we know: "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

Foresight can help sometimes, but it may also be in vain. The world has a way of crashing down on us no matter what we do. Over millions of years, wind and water wear away the earth itself. As we look at the ebb and flow of centuries, we ask: What does it all mean?

Back in 541-542 A.D., under the reign of Justinian, there was a great plague that wiped out at last 25-40% of the people of the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the Twelfth and Thirteen Centuries, the Mongol army under Genghis Khan killed millions of people in what is now China and Central Asia.

In World War II there was the Holocaust, the extermination of the Jews. People argue was it 7 million or 12 or 14 million who were killed?

We look back have no recollection and no concern for those killed centuries ago under Justinian. We can't do anything about that.

It's as if we all are drops of water in the ocean. In Hinduism they talk about the cycle of life, and you are born up or down the scale. Karma. Hindus hold that every 330 million years everything repeats itself, give or take a few million years. The ebb and flow, the eternal return. What does it matter about us? Or about evil? Or about good? It all is caught up in the great ebb and flow of the ages. That's one way to look at it.

Another way is to look at catastrophes. We know that floods, fires, and the like can quickly destroy lives and livelihoods. Nature can break down.

And then there's human nature which doesn't change from century to century, which means that evil can grow and war can come. Whole cities and countries can be annihilated. Suddenly we ask ourselves: What's happening, and how can we avoid it?

There's a famous example of the problem from the British historian, Herbert Butterfield. He talked about the peace that was put together in Europe in 1815. Russia and France were finally put down. After more than a hundred years of wars, the nations of the world gathered together in Vienna and said: "Let's solve this problem by creating a buffer state to keep Russian and France apart. In the process they created something called Germany, and that produced the war of 1870 and 1914 and 1939. That's the law of unintended consequences.

We think we're going to do this, and it goes that way. We know Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and in the worst way at the worst time."

There are other such adages: "Work expands to fill the time." "Nothing is as easy as it looks." And: "Don't say things are caused by evil when they can be just as readily explained by incompetence."

How can we deal with the problem that despite our best intentions, life often goes awry?

Given the precariousness of this world, where is there meaning? We struggle with how to move forward given the obstacles around and in front of us. On this slippery slope of dread, hopelessness, and meaningless, we try to keep busy, to keep it together. Where is it all going?

Here in the reading for today is this famous verse in Mark 3:29 (paraphrase): "Watch out so you don't commit the sin against the Holy Spirit, the unforgiveable sin."

Could we do that? That which is beyond forgiveness? That's not the only place this is said. In the Book of Hebrews, it says: 6:4-6: "There is no second forgiveness." If you have sinned once, that can be forgiven. Beyond that, no more.

The Old Testament lesson is about Adam and Eve and the fall into sin and how they're thrown out of the Garden. Psalm 51:5 speaks to this web of sin: "I was born in sin; in sin did my mother conceive me." And then the key verse for this whole discussion is Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all people because all sinned." It's a slippery slope and we're all caught in it, no matter how we try not to, no matter how education there is, no matter how much planning and foresight. What do we do?

The only way to get a handle on it and understand it is to start from the answer. The answer tells us what the real problem is. The answer is that the Lord from eternity saw our situation. He saw that we were in a situation we could not deal with. A hopeless situation. Impossible for the human being. And then he handled it his way by coming himself, dying and rising again. Holiness took on sin. The Lord who is the Lord of all came and died and rose again among us, really, truly. That tells us how serious a problem it is, and how it's something you and I could not imagine how to deal with, and it's dealt with his way.

Finally, it's done. He's accomplished it. John 19:30: "It is finished." So all of those problems we have are dealt with and understood that way. This means, for example, that when Paul writes in 1 Cor 15:26: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death," then death isn't something which is just anything, or something we should dismiss as natural. Death is an enemy, but it's been conquered.

Or in that same way Paul writes in Romans 6:3: "The wages of sin is death." And in the great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, it says in verse 56: "The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law." Suddenly of all these things which are beyond us are totally different from anything we can understand or deal with. They have been dealt with, his way.

Psalm 61:2 says: "Lead thou me to the rock that is higher than I." And in verse 4: "Oh to be safe under the shelter of thy wings!"

It's all put together in 1 Corinthians 15:56-57: Remember it starts: "The sting of death is sin." And then the next verse goes on to say: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

That's how we praise him and thank him. Amen.