We live in a world where sudden and unexpected death is not unusual. Whether or not it affects us directly, we hear about it on the news and through social media. Accident, crime, sudden illness, natural disaster: all may be causes of devastating loss.

In today’s gospel, Jesus fields questions from his followers about two events that have shaken their community to its core: the sudden killing of several Galileans by Roman soldiers; and the accidental deaths of eighteen people, killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed.

As we know well, any death can cause deep sadness and upheaval. Sudden, accidental, and/or violent deaths have the added qualities of shock, unpreparedness, and bewilderment.

If you recall the Great Litany that was said or sung on the 1st Sunday in Lent, this kind of death is among the perils from which we beg God to deliver us.

“From all oppression, conspiracy and rebellion, from violence, battle and murder, and from dying suddenly and unprepared, Good Lord, deliver us.”

Sudden and accidental deaths may feel, to some, like an act of God because of their abrupt and arbitrary nature. We wonder: Why that person? Why now?

So, the disciples wanted to know: Were these men who died being punished by God for their sin?

Who has not asked themselves at some point, when facing loss, or difficulty, or pain: “What did I do wrong?”

But Jesus is quick to reassure them—and us: No. These men did not die because of their sin. Then he urges all to whom he is speaking to repent.

Some commentaries mention political overtones to the deaths in this story and suggest that at least one aspect of Jesus’ call for repentance is to change course politically and avoid similar fates for even more people.
But knowing that Jesus invariably wanted those around him to practice faith, compassion and forgiveness, individual repentance is unquestionably part of his message also.

The Greek word for repentance is metanoia, a word that means “to turn around,” to do things differently. Repentance is more than feeling remorse for what we have done or not done. Repentance is a call for change: a call to turn toward God with new or renewed hope.

Eucharistic Prayer C, in our Book of Common Prayer, has a line that beautifully sums up this notion of repentance:

“Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.”

Times when we are broken-hearted, or stuck, or in pain are often the times when we turn to God most readily. We question our lives. We are open to help, and we are receptive to change. And God—well, God always wants to walk with us, and welcomes our turning.

We can hear the call for repentance—the call to do things differently—in Jesus’ parable of the fig tree.

The owner of a vineyard wants to cut down his fig tree for economic reasons: it is growing on valuable land but has not produced any fruit to justify its existence. The owner wants to expedite things.

The gardener is different. He persuades the owner to wait: to let him—the gardener—problem-solve, with the tree, and discern if there are fertilizers or other changes that could inspire it to fruitfulness.

In human speak, the gardener seeks to give the tree an opportunity to “repent,” rather than suffer an immediate death.

The tree cannot change on its own. It must depend on the gardener for help. It seems true to life that we all experience such times of dependence: times when we need encouragement from others to discover our gifts and strengths; times when we need support instead of judgment; times when we need the mercy of a second chance.
This gospel resonated with an article I read in the Sacramento Bee this week. In the wake of Governor Gavin Newsom’s moratorium on the death penalty for inmates on death row, various voices have been heard in the news. Most have been outcries from victim survivors who are angry that death sentences will not be carried out as expected.

Last Monday, I saw an article by a victim survivor that expressed a different view and caught my attention.

Ms. Aba Gayle’s 19-year-old daughter, Catherine, was murdered in 1980 by a man named Douglas Mickey.

Ms. Gayle, at the urging of the District Attorney, had pursued the death penalty for her daughter’s killer. She was told by the DA that the killer’s death would bring relief, closure and peace, and allow her to move on.

Twelve years later, her daughter’s killer remained on death row and she remained trapped in false expectations that Mr. Mickey would be executed.

After years of prayer and spiritual searching, she stopped writing letters to the DA to ask about execution and, instead, wrote directly to Mr. Mickey.

She said that as soon as she dropped her letter in the mailbox, a journey of true healing began. Mr. Mickey replied to her letter with one of his own, and he expressed profound remorse for what he had done. Later, after the two had met and talked, Ms. Gayle came to understand the pain that caused him to make the terrible decision that took her daughter’s life and changed her own so profoundly. She began to see him as a child of God, just like herself.

When I read this story, I thought of today’s gospel.

The suffering, anger, and soul searching that were set in motion by Catherine’s murder eventually became a deep, long call to repentance—a call that was experienced by both the killer, Mr. Mickey, and by the victim’s mother, Ms. Gayle. Each changed course to see the humanity in the other and, together, they managed to forge a relationship that enabled healing.
For years, each of them was like the fig tree that could not bear fruit. Had Mr. Mickey been executed quickly, reconciliation and healing would not have been possible. The unwanted delays in execution provided exactly the right manure to pile around the roots of their struggle and pain. Digging deeply into the soil of their losses and grief cultivated spiritual growth and opened the way to healing. Repentance, understanding, compassion, and forgiveness —these were the fruits of their efforts.

The players in our system of justice, with all of its procedures and processes, didn’t know they were operating on God’s time, but that’s how it turned out. It makes us ponder when and where else God is at work in our lives in ways that we can’t recognize until, suddenly, we do.

To close, I offer words from The Rev. Marshall Jolly’s online sermon that bring us back to the questions of sin and suffering with which Jesus and the disciples began their conversation in today’s gospel:

“Perhaps this parable is a reminder that God operates, not on our conventional conceptions of fairness and causes and effects; but rather God operates on contrarian wisdom—patience, faithful tending, and hopeful expectation.

Rather than certainty, rather than providing a recipe for putting an end to human suffering, rather than offering a panacea that would make the world turn on blissful peace and harmony, Luke 13 offers a word of good hope: God is still tending the garden. God is still working in and through God’s people to bring light and life, love and peace to a broken and sinful world.

And in that, there is indeed hope for us all.” Amen.