

## A Sermon on When Bad Things Happen to Good People

Luke 13: 1-9

When bad things happen to people, particularly good people, we try to make sense of it. Oftentimes, we ascribe some sort of moral failing to the bad thing that has happened. Someone falls into a long-term illness and we say, "Well, they didn't take care of themselves. They didn't eat right, or drank too much." We try to make sense of it by connecting the illness to something they've done wrong. And if they haven't seemed to have done anything wrong, maybe it's our fault, something we've done wrong that's caused our child to be ill, or our child to be imprisoned: "Sins of the parents, visited on the child." Thinking that may bring tremendous guilt, but at least then, the world makes sense; there is cause and effect. Sin leads to suffering. I can make sense of that.

But this morning, Jesus says, NO! to this line of thinking. Jesus says, rather than trying to parse out the sins of suffering people, rather than trying to discuss the moral failing that's led to someone's demise, instead Jesus takes this opportunity to invite all of us to repent and turn more fully towards God.

Our text this morning opens with Jesus standing with a crowd, which no doubt included some of his disciples and followers who are from Galilee. Someone shows up in the crowd and they are like an ancient news anchor reporting on recent world news: "The Governor Pilate has just sent Roman police to kill a group of Galileans who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish holiday of Passover. The Galileans were in the temple offering sacrifices when Pilate's police broke into the house of worship and killed them."

This is not the first time something like this has happened. The Romans view Galileans as troublemakers. And so, especially around Jewish holidays, Roman police are far more present and active and keep their eyes on any potentially "dangerous" Galileans.

The crowd surrounding Jesus begins to react in some way. Perhaps some gasp. Some are afraid for their family members already in Jerusalem. Was one of them hurt? Some are jaded and they don't want to talk about Roman violence against Galileans anymore. And some of the crowd, no doubt, were murmuring to

themselves or others, “I wonder what that group of Galileans was doing, for the police to come down on them for that. Maybe they were planning to incite a riot, maybe they were carrying weapons in the temple, and God wouldn’t like that.”

And then over the reactions and mutterings of the crowd, Jesus speaks up: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, that they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did.”

What is Jesus saying? He is telling the crowd to stop spending their time and energy trying to discern some causal link between sin and suffering. Stop assuming that when someone suffers a random act of state-sanctioned violence that they must in some way be at fault. Stop trying to make sense of the world by assuming that those who are down and out must have done something wrong to deserve their suffering.

But the reality is we have not made it safely here this morning, clothed and in our right mind due to my own moral superiority. It is not due to our work ethic or how much good we’ve done. We are here this morning while others are laid up, strung out or shut in, not because of what we’ve done, but because God in God’s grace filled our lungs this morning and set us on our way. We’re not here because of who we are but because of who God is. And so Jesus says “Take the opportunity God has given you, since you’ve been given another day to ‘Repent and turn more fully towards your God.’”

Then Jesus gives another example: “Those 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think they were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem? A tower fell randomly on 18 people, and people were saying, “Well, they must have been some kind of sinners”.

You know what? This is reminiscent of when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. And there were Christians out there saying that God had sent that hurricane to destroy New Orleans because it was a sinful city. And the insurance companies have us messed up because they call random disasters “acts of God”.

No, Jesus says, those 18 weren’t felled because they were any worse than any others living in Jerusalem at the time. But you need to recognize, you are no

different from them, in all truth; tomorrow is not promised. So repent today. Turn more fully towards your God while you have the opportunity.

Maybe you have heard the Winans' song, "Tomorrow, I'll give my life tomorrow". Who promised you tomorrow? You had better choose the Lord today, for tomorrow may very well be too late.

Jesus says, "Repent, turn towards God" while you can. And you know, it's not clear we really understand, church, what it means to repent. Because just like we think that when someone suffers it must have to do with moral failing, likewise we think repentance is moral, too. We think that when Jesus says "Repent", he is saying change your behavior: make a moral change in your life.

No, church, we've misunderstood what the word repent means. Repent in the Greek metanoia connotes a turning. The invitation is not to change your behavior but the invitation is to turn back to your God.

And here's where we get it twisted, because we think that we've got to get our lives all clean and tidy before we turn back to God. We've got this one area in our life, one thing in our family, one bad habit and then once I get myself straightened out, then I'll turn back to God.

But we got it backwards. First turn more fully towards God, then allow God to remake and reshape you. Once we turn more fully to God, God will make us more moral, God will clean us up and clean us out, God will do for us what we cannot do on our own.