

March 20th, 2022

Luke 13:1-9 “Tragedy Happens”

Ever find yourself asking, “What did I ever do to deserve this?” I do on occasion. I suspect others do too ... not everyone, of course but some. Sometimes the answer to this question is obvious. “What did I do to deserve this? Well, I was texting and driving and that’s why my car is wrapped around that lamp post.” Actions have consequences, so you can’t really complain about something you’re directly responsible for. But if you’re just sitting on a park bench and somebody’s car jumps the curb and hits you because *they* were texting and driving there’s no connection. It’s *not* your fault, but you still might ask, “What have I ever done to deserve this?” So *why do* we still ask this question even if we’re not at fault? Because we’ve all bought into this idea that we talked about a few weeks ago that, “If you obey God’s commandments then God will bless you and good things will happen. But if bad things are happening to you, that means you are not obeying God.” And again, at some level this almost makes sense, except Jesus rejects that kind of thinking over and over in the gospels.

Jesus calls us to another way of looking at things, and that’s what we’re going to do this morning. In our scripture, a group of people approached Jesus to tell him that the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate murdered some

worshippers from Galilee and mingled their blood with the blood of their regular ritual sacrifices. They assumed that the only way this sort of thing could have happened was that the victims somehow deserved God's punishment. So it's likely they went to Jesus to confirm this belief so they could go on thinking that the world is a safe, orderly place so long as you do the right thing. But if you think about it, what they *really* wanted was probably some assurance that God must be pleased with *them* because they *weren't* victims.

Not only does Jesus deny this faulty doctrine, not only does he refute the *suggestion* that God causes human misery to punish us, but he turns the question back on the ones who asked and said, "But I tell you that unless you repent, you're going to face a similar fate." Now logically speaking, this doesn't make much sense because it sounds almost like the very doctrine that Jesus is trying to refute! What I think Jesus is trying to do here is to shift their focus. He's saying that you can spend a lot of time and energy working out the extent of *other* people's sin but then never bother to look at your *own*. He's saying that if you're looking for the seeds of destruction, take a look at your *own* heart, because if you can't face up to the evil there and root it out, then you'll never get anywhere dealing with the evil that's out there in the rest of the world.

Then, in true Jesus form, he tells a parable about God's mercy and God's judgment. I'll tell you right now, most of us aren't going to understand this parable because we don't get it. We are far too removed from his time and culture to fully get it. This is a vineyard parable. How many of you own and operate a vineyard? How many of you are practitioners of ancient Judaism and understand the significance of vineyard parables in Hebrew scripture? Me neither. Here's where we say, "Thank God for Bible scholars." In vineyard parables, the vineyard always stood for the people of Israel. Fig trees in the vineyard always stood for those who *ruled* Israel. So when Jesus says the fig tree in the vineyard is not bearing any fruit, everybody would have known what he meant, especially when it is in response to questions about other people's sin. Jesus is saying, "If you want to talk about who needs to repent, take a look at your own role as leaders in the community. What sort of fruit are you bearing?" And Jesus doesn't just *write off* the unfruitful leadership. He says that judgment would call for the tree to be chopped down, but it is *mercy* that pleads for that tree to have another chance. God's mercy asks for a reprieve and then promises to redouble the efforts at nurturing the tree so it has every opportunity to produce fruit.

Jesus is doing two remarkable things here. First, he is emphasizing the priority of God's mercy over the inevitability of God's judgment. He doesn't deny the

possibility of judgment ... he doesn't deny the possibility of the tree eventually being chopped down ... but he does say that it will be given every opportunity to avoid that fate, which includes receiving the best nurture and care. Secondly Jesus is redefining repentance. Now step outside the parable for a moment. How do we typically define the word "repent?" Sure! Repentance means turning around but ... we tend to focus on the life that we turn *away* from. The Greek word we translated as "repentance" is "metanoia." That's the root word for "metamorphosis" which we understand as "transformation." It's what happens to a caterpillar when it metamorphizes into a butterfly. And just like a butterfly, the emphasis is on what it *turns into*, not what it *turned from*. So when Jesus says "Repent," he's not just saying, "Turn *from* sin," he's saying, "Turn *to* God."

Jesus is describing a God who is not terribly interested in keeping a ledger for each one of our sinful actions. What God is interested in is humans fulfilling our role as co-creators with God. And if that is who God is, then repentance is a decision to join God in bringing love and peace and justice into the world thus bringing about the reign of God in the world. Or as some preachers who like to rhyme might say, "The focus is not on what we break, but on what we make." We live up to what we were created to be when we become partners with God in bringing about God's reign into this world.

How many of you have seen the movie *Forest Gump*? There was this brief scene about the origin of a famous tee-shirt. Even if you never saw *Forest Gump*, you may remember seeing this tee-shirt in the 1970s. It was a very simple design. A yellow smiley face and two words. One of those words I don't like saying from the pulpit, so we'll use the Greek word "koprian" which is, ironically, here in verse 9 of our scripture this morning. Joe read this passage from the New Revised Standard whose translators chose the English word "manure." So, the famous 1970s tee-shirt is, "Koprian Happens." It's a good slogan in a way; a bit crass, but clear and simple. Its kind of a philosophical shrug of the shoulders in the face of meaningless tragedy. It says, "Hey, don't try to explain it or understand it. There's no rhyme or reason. Sometimes koprian happens. It really doesn't *mean* anything, it just happens."

A tornado whips through a midwestern town and kills dozens of people. A volcano explodes and takes out an entire town. A child is born with a rare lethal disease that cannot be cured. A famine strikes an already impoverished country and displaces thousands of people. You lost your job and can't find another. You find out that the cancer you thought you beat years ago comes back. These are terrible things that you just can't explain. There's no real reason why it happened to you and not

someone else. It just happened. You'll only drive yourself crazy if you try to figure out how you deserved it or why God wanted it to happen to you. Here's the thing - God *didn't* want it to happen to you *or anybody* for that matter. It just happened. The question is where do we go and what do we do now?

What Jesus says to those trying to come to terms with tragic situations is "repent," which sounds terrible until you remember that "repent" means "turn to God" more so than it means, "turn from sin." Metanoia.

Metamorphosis. Be transformed. See, this makes sense when you're dealing with tragedy and suffering. God did not cause this, it just happened. But God *can* make something out of it. God can turn any death into the basis of a resurrection. Consider that a sneak preview of Easter. But remember, we're still in Lenten season. We're still on this path in the wilderness on our way to the cross. For us to find the resurrection, it is up to us to repent ... it's up to us to turn around and follow Jesus on the path that leads through suffering to new life. The path that Jesus leads us on is not one that avoids suffering, but it is one that comes out on the other side of it.

Tragedy happens. God doesn't cause it, but God's goodness is not thwarted by it. God is not going to let it prevent you from experiencing the love and goodness of God. However, God understands when you're barren and

not producing the kind of fruit you are capable of producing because of what's been going on in your life. God's mercy will not allow the fig tree to be cut down just because it hasn't borne any fruit lately. God's mercy says, "Hey, maybe this tree needs a bit more love and care before we can expect much of it." If you're just getting over a death in the family, or a relationship breakdown, or a psychiatric illness or whatever, God doesn't expect you to be out there changing the world. There are going to be times in everyone's life when they have very little to give and will need a lot of care and nurture.

God is unbelievably good to us. God's goodness and love go far beyond any rational limits. God repeatedly pours out love and opportunity on those who appear to be lost causes. But it must be said, in fairness to the parable that Jesus told, that the possibility of the axe eventually getting the go ahead is still there. God's love is *unconditional* in that there are no requirements for eligibility ... everyone receives God's love. But it *is* conditional in that there is a required response. We are required to respond to God's goodness by stepping onto this path and following Jesus and working with him to create a world of love and peace. And as I've said, and I stress once again, only God knows whether you're able to put much effort into fulfilling this mission. If not, God will happily wait and give you all the care and nurture

you require, but if you squander it all away and never grow, this parable doesn't let you off the hook.

That is the challenge for us today. That's the challenge for the church today. No just ours, but all churches. God has been extraordinarily good to us. We are stable. And as I've said before, in this day and age in the midst of a global pandemic, war, fires and dozens of other calamities we have faced and still face, stable is awesome. Now it's up to us to produce the fruit. That's why this work we've been doing to get our facilities and ministries up and running again is so important. God has been good to us, so we have to take that goodness and get ready for the harvest. It's up to us to turn toward God, be transformed and follow Jesus into the future.