

God, Suffering, and Evil
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Luke 13:1-9

13At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

6Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ 8He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

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Our gospel for today opens with stories of tragedy for the people. When we were at confirmation the other weekend we also discussed tragedies because I think we can agree, they are happening all around us. Our students did an excellent job describing what they would consider a tragedy and I am wondering how you would describe it? What are words you would use?

They also said... Loss, really bad, something sad, traumatizing, unexpected, suffering, distress, destruction, serious accident, crime, a catastrophe.

Two different types of tragedies are named by the people who are gathering before Jesus today. In one Luke writes about how Pilate (Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea) murdered a number of Galilean Jews and then mingled their blood with the animal sacrifices they were offering up to God. He not only kills people for reasons unknown but he desecrates their bodies afterwards and disrespects their faith practices.

A terrible tragedy perpetrated by a bloodthirsty man who will eventually also commit Jesus to be crucified.

Then we get a story of a tower that fell. Another instance of innocent people being killed. Who is to blame? Who made the tower? Or, was it just a tragedy, one with no meaning or a perpetrator. Like a natural disaster and victims of a hurricane or wildfire.

And the people are concerned about why these things happened. They are asking that age old question, why do bad things happen to good people? And, could these people really have been innocent? Were they being punished by God through these tragedies?

A big question right. But Jesus answers them in no uncertain terms.

What’s the answer, are they being punished by God?... No.

No, they were not being punished, no they were not greater sinners than anyone else, no this tragedy did not befall them because of their sins. But what might be unsatisfying is that Jesus does not offer up the answer of why bad things happen, just the knowledge that God is not the one offering up tragedies as punishment.

And this concern is on the peoples' minds and I think we can empathize because tragedies are on our minds as well.

I know that we all have heard the news stories of war in Ukraine and the one most recently that is particularly tragic is the bombings in Mariupol, especially of the maternity ward at the hospital, of people who are without power and water, who are hungry and scared. Our confirmation kids, at our retreat the other weekend named this tragedy and we prayed for it as we collected all of the prayers for those in need that were on our hearts.

And we wondered together, how can these things happen? How can someone be so awful to perpetrate such evil? How can life be so unfair? Why doesn't God step in?

We know that tragedies happen on many scales. We feel them across the world in Ukraine, the loss of innocent life, and with the struggles of those attempting to flee.

We feel them in this country. Wildfires and bills against gay and transgender people.

We feel them in the homes of our friends and our own homes. People we love dying too early, the loss of jobs, pets, friends, and illness.

And we are just like those folks in Jesus' day because our minds go straight to asking why these things happen and who is to blame, Did they deserve it? Do we deserve it?

But Jesus tries to help the people to see a different way. Jesus tries to turn us away from assigning blame and worrying that we will be punished by God when he says no.

And here we come to that confusing line in our gospel, when Jesus says, ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

He doesn't mean that, if you don't ask for forgiveness from your sins you will die in a horrible and tragic way.

No, he means that those folks who died, died so unexpectedly, suddenly and unprepared, that is the way in which they died. For they did not know the things that we know about life and death that could prepare us for whatever might await us, even a tragic ending.

In our book study we have been reading together Kate Bowler's book, No cure for being human where she faces a very severe and tragic diagnosis of cancer that could possibly kill her. In the book she wrestles with this knowledge that she could die while also trying to make the most of the time she has left.

I was fascinated this week with all of the things that she did, how she tried to preserve a bit of herself for her family while she was still living. She hires a photographer to take family portraits, she works on writing a book, she plans what clothes to give away.

She has to deeply reflect on how she is going to live when she bears witness to how fragile life truly is how she could die at any moment. A reality that is not out of the picture for any one of us.

And I think that is the reality that Jesus offers the most wisdom into. And it is a wisdom for life, not for death. He tells the people to repent and to turn away from worrying about the why of the tragedy and towards how they respond to the tragedy. How they will go on living their own lives for as long as they have left.

Jesus tells us how to turn our lives around and focus not on being punished by God in the afterlife or by an untimely end, but on how we are living in this world, in a world with the very real possibility that we could die at any moment.

In a world of injustice, how we spread justice.

In a world where tragedy happens, how we turn to Jesus.

And that's rung true for me over these past few weeks. A few weeks ago my dad died. And it was a tragic death in a way because we didn't have a relationship over the past few years and the one we had when I was growing up was complicated, difficult and I would not call him a loving father.

He died with our relationship broken and without any apparent desire to change his own heart.

I had to reconcile with the fact, an adult that the relationship was never going to bear good fruit and I was not the one who could nurture it in a way that it would ever do so.

And it is tragic to die in that way without ever repenting and believing the good news in life that Jesus offers. When that's the reality we face at the end of life, it is tragic and sad because Jesus offers us a different way to be in the world.

And that's why Jesus tells us the story of the fig tree. Because we are all offered the chance to live in a way that bears good fruit in this world.

Jesus offers us grace in the parable of the fig tree because he is the gardener who advocates for us the fig tree. He realizes that it is hard for us to repent and change and sometimes it is hard to bear good fruit like the struggling fig tree. Sometimes we need more care, more love, and to be reminded that we are worthy of living a life that is filled with God's promises. But the gardener offers the nourishment that will cause the fig tree to bear good fruit.

So as you leave this place, I know it can be easy to focus on all of the injustice, the unfairness of this world, the seemingly unexplainable tragedies, that even Jesus offers no explanation of why they happen. But remember that when we wonder about why those things happen, Jesus turns instead to us, to people who follow Him and he asks us to turn our hearts and minds to how *we* are bearing good fruit in this world in need.

