

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Luke 13:1-9 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.² Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

⁸ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

“The Christian Response to Tragedy”

4. Christians Respond Ignorantly and Insensitively

The nation was reeling. People were looking for answers. And this was one response they received: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped [9/11] happen.'"¹ Christians quickly distanced themselves from these words spoken by the Reverend Jerry Falwell after the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Then more recently, we hear this: The Las Vegas attack was the result of disrespect for President Trump, televangelist Pat Robertson told his viewers back in October. There is “violence in the streets,” [Robertson said](#), because “we have disrespected authority. There is profound disrespect for our president, all across this nation. They say terrible things about him.”² And we may agree with the general principle that respect for authority is in short supply in our society. Just as any parent, teacher, police officer, or elected official. And we do recognize that many of the problems we face in our society come from a failure to honor the people God has placed over us to bless us. And yet, can anyone really say with any degree of certainty why that tragic shooting took place?

¹ <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/stupidquotes/a/falwellquotes.htm>; accessed on March 2, 2013.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/10/03/yes-pat-robertson-blamed-the-vegas-shooting-on-disrespect-for-trump-and-the-national-anthem/?utm_term=.16de00d5644e; Accessed on 1 March 2018.

Let's start off by acknowledging sometimes Christians say some pretty stupid things. Westboro Baptist Church outside military funerals. Christians who defended Nazis, genocide, human rights abuses, the Inquisition. The list goes on. If you had been running a video tape 100% of the time around me, you would have caught me saying something dumb. But that doesn't mean we have to defend everything every Christian says. Neither do we need to acknowledge that they speak as spokespeople for God.

Actually, there are times when the best response is no response. You don't need to have an answer. You don't need to pretend you know the reason why. Not unless God has made you into a prophet like Jeremiah or Isaiah, pointing to specific sins of his people and specific consequences God brings as a result. It's ok to say you don't know. There are tragedies. There are terrible events all around us. And God doesn't always offer us an explanation.

3. We Naturally Judge

Without being too harsh, we understand why people sometimes offer an answer even if they can't be 100% sure about God's reasons for anything that happens. We have one example in Luke chapter 13 today: **"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."** (Luke 13:1) When something so horrible happens, people are devastated. They are hurting. And they are looking for answers. And so we want to help them. We want to give them answers. We understand that impulse to offer some sort of explanation. We just want to be able to make sense of something senseless.

Now in this particular episode in Luke chapter 13, we don't know exactly why the crowds tell Jesus about this incident. Maybe they were hoping to use an outraged Jesus as ammunition for a bloody insurrection against Pilate and the Romans. Maybe it was a test to see who Jesus would support in that contentious political climate. Maybe they were secretly hoping Jesus would say something or do something supportive of the Romans so he would lose his popular support.

Whatever the motives were for bringing this incident to Jesus' attention, Jesus cuts to the unspoken accusations in their hearts: **"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"** (Luke 13:2) Jesus even brings up another incident. This one doesn't have a convenient villain like Pilate: **"Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?"** (Luke 13:4) No one around Jesus probably even made that accusation out loud. But they were all thinking it. They must have done something.

In senseless tragedies, there aren't easy answers. There seldom are. But pointing a finger makes it easier. We want answers. We look for someone to blame. Maybe it was the parents. It must have been the school. None of this would have happened if it weren't for the media, Facebook, video games. We all become experts at thorny, complicated conundrums. And we settle on the easiest answers because there are some deeply

troubling events in our world that we just can't ignore. We have to confront them. But Jesus doesn't let us off the hook so easily.

Jesus reads their thoughts and gives them a definite answer: **"I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."** (Luke 13:3) It wasn't the answer they were expecting. It wasn't the answer they were after. But it is the answer every human being needs to hear. See, Jesus, as he so often does, is trying to change the conversation.

There is a natural tension here. No, people don't die in accidents because they are worse people than the rest of us. Yes, whenever you hear about those events, you need to repent. Which is it Jesus? Do bad things happen because of the sinful things we do? Or are they completely random with no one to blame and no one responsible?

2. Personal Repentance Seeks God's Solution

First of all, we have to admit we don't always get all the answers. The way God works in this world and the reasons behind so many actions, will always remain hidden to us limited human beings. But we can apply principles from the times when God speaks clearly in his Word. Did God cause this accident? No, God isn't responsible for evil. Did God want it to happen? Sometimes we have to stick with the basics. We absolutely, definitely know God wants all people to turn to him in repentance and be saved. Does that mean he was behind a particular tragedy? We don't know. Did God put those particular people in that specific spot at that moment for a very good reason? We may never know. But that's not the point. Those aren't even the right questions. We are trying to peak into the mind of God who doesn't reveal everything to us. In the process, we are skipping over the times when God is very clear.

Jesus turns our finger pointing to self-reflection: **"I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."** (Luke 13:5) And why not. Jesus isn't so concerned with assigning blame. He's most passionate about each individual soul, not about which group or team you are part of. So Jesus isn't so concerned whether you are part of the group that gets it right on gun control. He isn't paying attention to whether or not you are part of the top 25% of your graduating class. Or even if you are included in the 4 out of 10 people who lie to their dentist and say they floss every day.³ Jesus is most concerned with what is going on inside your heart.

Of course Jesus is aware there are plenty of other sinners out there. Plenty of people who don't believe in Him or care about Him or concern themselves with anything in the Bible. But Jesus is concerned about you. Your heart. Your soul. Your salvation. You are like a tree, Jesus says. He illustrates this concern with a picture from nature: **"A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any."** (Luke 13:6) God has planted you in His garden of faith. Now He is looking for results. God wants to see in you something more than just better than just being there.

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/06/24/417184367/are-you-flossing-or-just-lying-about-flossing-the-dentist-knows>

The only appropriate response to God's probing in your heart is repentance. Whether it is the Galileans brutally cut down by vicious Pilate or the 18 people buried by the tower in Siloam or an earthquake that buries a village in Peru, these events are wake up calls for you and me. Death is an expired lease on life. We don't know when the term will come to an end. We just know God expects us to use our lives however long God gives us as our time of grace. Repentance recognizes a disconnect between what God expects and what God sees in my life. God looks for a pure heart. God anticipates productive actions coming from that pure heart. God expects fruit coming from faith. God looks at you and God looks at me and examines our relationship with him.

1. Christians Live and Share Christ's Intervention

Notice the problem if you are the unproductive tree planted in God's vineyard? A worthless tree can't do much for itself. That's why repentance reaches out for a solution outside of yourself. You have someone who works for you, works on your behalf. Jesus steps in to keep the ax away for one more season. Jesus pleads your case. Jesus offers His life, His obedience, His perfect fruit. Jesus intercedes for you based on His atoning work.

Then Jesus goes to work on you. Jesus digs. Jesus fertilizes. Jesus uses every means at His disposal to change your sin-deadened, unfruitful heart. And through repentance God provides a way out. A change of heart is your escape. Turning away from your sin and worthless lack of fruit does more than blaming anyone else for tragedy. Turning away from your solution to see Jesus as your Savior gives true safety instead of a false sense of security.

So what do you say? What can you say the next time a deranged gunman opens fire on a crowd of innocent bystanders? What possible explanation could you offer if a sinkhole swallows up an unsuspecting motorist? God doesn't always tell us why. Truthfully, God seldom gives us the answers we are looking for. We do know all misery and suffering in this world is ultimately caused by sin. It is the reality of living in a sinful, fallen world. But God uses every calamity as a call to repent, a divine warning call to avoid perishing. Sin causes evil. Sin is all around us. Only Jesus can provide an escape.

And you do have the answer to the biggest questions. When tragedy strikes, you know God isn't punishing you. He poured out his wrath for sin when Jesus suffered in your place on the cross. Those victims aren't worse than anyone else. They are created in the image of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Don't point your finger in blame at the victims. Point in hope to the cross of Jesus. Don't give a presumptuous or arrogant opinion disguised as God's answer. Acknowledge you don't have all the answers. But God offers you a new lease on life. This is the time for repentance and faith. This is the time of God's patience. Jesus isn't oblivious to your pain. He doesn't turn his back on anyone affected by tragedy. He calls all people to trust in him and find in him their peace and security.

+May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. +