

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bad things happen. You don't have to live for very long to figure that out. Children learn that pretty quickly. But *why* do bad things happen? It's a good question. It's a child's question, and children have lots of good questions. One of the frustrating things about being an adult is not always having good answers to good questions. Part of the problem is that not all bad things are alike. Some bad things happened because people are careless, or because they are inexperienced, or because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. You may have heard about the young man who was recently killed here in town when he was cleaning up a crash site and was struck by another young person, a sixteen-year old new driver. Why did it happen? There are lots of opinions, lots of conclusions based on I'm not sure what. I made the mistake of reading the comments on an on-line edition of one of the newspaper articles about the accident – or maybe it was on the Nextdoor App. Some mentioned that there had been a violation of Scott's law, the Illinois law that mandates moving over and slowing down when encountering emergency or service vehicles on the side of the road. Some observed that the new driver should have known that law and should have slowed down and moved over. Others were quick to conclude that the kid hadn't been paying attention, or was texting, or didn't care about the rules and should have the book thrown at them. Other were more empathetic, noting that this young person will now have to live with that they killed somebody for the rest of their life. Now I am sure there was a crash-site investigation, as there should be. Determining what caused this tragic death is important for figuring out how to make things safer for everyone in the future. It's why airplane crashes are investigated so thoroughly. But other lingering "why" questions can't be answered. "Why me?" the young driver might be asking, "Why did I have to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? Why didn't I see him? Why didn't I slow down?" Similar questions will be asked by the family and friends of the young man who died. "Why him? Why *my* child? Why my friend?"

The ancient cultures of the Bible were not satisfied with leaving such questions unanswered. There was a broad consensus that if something bad happened to you then you must have done something to deserve it. This is what the three friends repeatedly argue in the book of Job. It's the presumption of the people in the Gospel of John who want to know if a blind man or his parents had sinned to cause his blindness. And it is what the people in today's Gospel reading also assume in their questions to Jesus. We don't actually know the precise question they asked, but we can infer its general sentiment from Jesus' response. There had been some Galileans who were encouraging the local people to resist the Romans and refuse to pay taxes. Pilate took advantage of them coming to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices, and had a detachment of soldiers trap them on the temple grounds and then go in and slaughter them. The question must have been, did they deserve their fate? Jesus brings up another deadly incident when a number of people were killed with a tower in Jerusalem collapsed. "Were they especially deserving of their fate?" he asks in return. And then he answers, because it's a rhetorical question. "No!" Sorting people into better and worse sinners is not interesting or useful. In fact, it distracts from the core issue, so stop doing that. That is the first thing to notice and to take away from this passage.

The second thing to notice is that core issue, namely that all people are in need of repentance. The fact that tragedy has not struck your life does not make you a better person, or insulate you from tragedy. The impulse to blame victims for the bad things that happen to them

is a red herring. All of you, says Jesus, need to change your attitudes, your loyalties, and your behaviors. Arguing about who's the worst sinner is something like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. "The ship is going down and you need to get into lifeboats. Focus on that. All of you are estranged from God. All of you are failing and being who you were created to be: those who love God with their whole heart and their neighbors as themselves." If we left the story here, as we might be tempted to do, then we would be back with the crowds that John the Baptist was preaching to earlier in the Gospel. "Get your act together. Change your lives. Just do it. You're responsible. Make good choices."

I guess that might work for some people some of the time. I mean we do keep making New Years resolutions every year, don't we? And sometimes we might actually keep them. For a little while at least, and maybe even for a long while in some exceptional cases. But the fact is that we are generally pretty terrible at willing ourselves to reform, mostly because deep down we really don't want to. And that's why that next part of this story is so necessary. At On The Way last Monday, someone asked the very astute question, "what do these two parts of the reading have to do with each other?" Another good question. Here's what I think is the answer:

In the parable of the fig tree, the tree doesn't bear fruit. It doesn't do the one thing it was planted for, the thing that fig trees were created to do. It is a defective fig tree. But no amount of cajoling or pleading or threatening will change that. Trees can't just decide to bear fruit if it's not happening. There is a root problem – literally – that needs to be addressed, and that's just not something that trees can do anything about. They need an arborist, a tree gardener. The landowner wants figs. That's why he had the tree planted. And if he had followed the rules, he waited six years after it was planted for that fruit. Now it's the third year, so eight years after it was planted. Eight years wasted, it seems. Time to start over, he decides. "Dig it out." But the gardener asks for another chance. He will address the root problem. He will dig around it and fertilize it. Maybe there will be fruit next year.

This is the hopeful answer to John the Baptist's warning earlier in Luke that "even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree." We are meant to be bearing love for God and for one another. But instead we are turned in on ourselves, using up the soil only for ourselves. We extract resources and generate waste. We exploit the labor of others while denying them decent wages. We create and promote unhealthy and idle lifestyles for the sake of profit. We are fruitless trees who might as well be dug up. But thanks be to God we have a gardener, an arborist. In Jesus Christ, God has come deep down into the depth of our fruitless existence to make things right. He lives a life that is focused on caring for others; healing, exorcising evil, and calling people into genuine relationship with God and one another. And then by his death and resurrection he breaks our deadly cycle of sin and evil and opens the way to new life, the life that God created us for in the first place.

Bad things, I'm sorry to say, are going to continue to happen. Tragedies will abound, some of our own making, some just the result of the laws of nature and bad timing. The news is full of them. It's enough to make you want to give up. But it is this messed up world that Jesus came to save. He will not give up on us, and even now is at work in us by the power of the Holy Spirit, to forgive, strengthen, and empower us to live the life we were created for, and to be signs and beacons of life and hope even in the midst of weariness, fear, and despair. May we trust in that promise, the promise of our baptism, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.