3rd Sunday in Lent (C), March 23, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 13:1-9 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
A year ago on Thanksgiving Eve I gave the sermon at our joint worship service over in Urbana. I talked about my interest in aviation and the concept of situational awareness, the idea that pilots have to constantly update themselves on what is happening with the airplane they're flying, how fast they're going, where they are and what's up ahead, what weather there might be, or terrain, or other obstacles like tall buildings or antennas as they get nearer the ground. I used that idea to talk about giving thanks as an exercise in everyday situational awareness, recognizing where our blessings came from and responding accordingly. It was after that service that Royce Wilken told me that he had a pilot license, though he didn't fly any more. Anyway, that is just to remind you of my avid and ongoing interest in aviation, and so you won't find it surprising that I listen to a lot of podcasts and YouTube videos that have to do particularly with analyzing aviation mishaps. You might have notice that there have been quite a few of those recently. The purpose of investigating airplane incidents is to prevent future crashes by learning what went wrong, and sometimes what went right. A few weeks ago, for example, there was a near miss at Chicago's Midway Airport. What went wrong was that a small private jet crossed a runway that a Southwest Airlines plane was landing on. It turns out they were not very familiar with the airport and didn't realize that the runway they crossed was the one they were supposed to hold short of. And they didn't see the Southwest plane landing, even though they looked down the runway like they're supposed to, because the sun was right behind the landing plane at the time of the incident. What went right, and made this only a near miss a not a disaster, was that the Southwest pilots were watching this smaller plane, assuming it would hold short of the runway as it had been instructed to do, but watching just in case. And so when that plane didn't stop, they were ready, and immediately took action to abort their landing. You want these kinds of investigations to happen, whether you're interested in the details like I am or not, because you want to know that it's safe to board an airplane. You want to know that steps are being taken to ensure that past disasters aren't repeated in the future, especially disasters you might be otherwise subject to.

So it might be a little disconcerting to hear Jesus seemingly dismiss these kinds of concerns in the first part of today's Gospel reading. He gets asked about an incident where pilgrims to Jerusalem were killed by Roman soldiers. We don't know any more about the incident than that, except that it fits with what we do know about the brutality of the Roman occupation in general and specifically under Pontius Pilate. We also don't know how the question was asked. It might have been nothing more than, "hey, did you hear about those pilgrims?" But it might have been, "why did that have to happen?" – a version of, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?" And baked into those latter forms of the question is an implicit suspicion that maybe God *doesn't* allow bad things to happen to good people, and that those people weren't innocent. Maybe they did something to deserve their fate. Maybe they were some of those radicals, those Zealots who were always looking for a fight with the Romans. They "messed around and found out," to clean up a popular recent expression. So, Jesus plucks another disaster out of the recent news, people who were killed when a tower collapsed. What do you do with that? Do you think the tower waited for a particularly bad group of people to pass by before it decided to fall?

What has long been comforting and helpful to me in Jesus' response here is his attack on this idea that people deserve what happens to them, that the world is engineered in such a way

that if you're good, if you behave, if you follow the rules, then things will go well for you. And if you don't, things will go badly. It's an instinctual human sense, I think, that is just as real in our time as it was when Luke was writing his Gospel. These days we talk about "karma" a lot, which we borrowed from Indian religions, although I'm not sure we make that connection any more. But karma is a nice shorthand for what Jesus is critiquing here, the idea that if you're poor, or if you're sick, it is ultimately your own fault. So, well done, Jesus.

But then Jesus starts talking about repentance. People who experience disasters or misfortunes of one kind or another are no worse than those who don't, he says, "but unless you repent, you will perish as they did." What? Did Jesus just contradict himself? Did he just promote the idea he was only a second ago critiquing? A lot depends on what Jesus means by "repent." That's a word we don't use much anymore except in specifically religious contexts. And we associate it with moral uprightness, with avoiding certain behaviors and reforming particular habits. But repentance in our biblical texts is much broader than that, as you have heard me say before. It's about a fundamental change in attitude and a change in heart. The Greek word means literally, "think differently," (which used to be Apple's slogan, but with better grammar.)

What Jesus is saying here is that we need to change the way we think about how God works. God is not karma. Stop blaming people for the evil that befalls them in order to make yourself feel more secure and to absolve yourself of responsibility. Bad things happen. They happen to all sorts of people, and they might happen to you. An airplane following all of the rules full of people just like you might suddenly be hit by a helicopter flying too high and tracking a different airplane. Children might be born into poverty to people who were themselves born into poverty, going back generations to that "Peculiar Institution" of slavery that was mentioned in one of last Wednesday's readings. Instead of focusing on how you're "thankful that you're not them," focus instead on seeing them as those who are worthy of your care and attention, as if they were your own children. Because that is how God sees them.

And that is the connection with the second part of this Gospel reading, a connection I don't think that I have quite made before. It's a parable, so be careful of making it a strict analogy. But do notice the contrasting attitudes. The owner of the fig tree that isn't producing fruit wants it cut down. It's of no use to him, and it's wasting good soil. The gardener thinks differently. "How can I help?" is his implicit question. And so he is willing to give it time and attention and care so that it can be what it was created to be – a fruit-bearing tree.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this is the repentance that is called for in the season of Lent and throughout our lives: a change in attitude toward God and our fellow human beings, a change in heart that sees other people not as means to our own ends, but as connected to us and part of us. Bad things are going to happen in this life. They're going to happen to other people, and sometimes they're going to happen to us. Our response, which is God's response, is not to distance ourselves from disasters and misfortunes, but to draw nearer to those who are suffering, to help them bear the burden of their circumstances. Because that, of course, is what God does for us in Jesus Christ, the one truly good person, who on the cross entered fully into the bad things that we experience, who took on the worst we can experience and brought new life out of it. That is the hope we cling to in this season of repentance, the hope that enables us to "think differently" and live as God's agents of love, forgiveness, and hope in the world. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.