

**Lent IIIc
Luke 13:1-9
March 7, 2010**

Why do bad things happen? It is a question our gospel lesson raises this morning. It is a question that has provoked and perplexed people as long as humanity has walked the earth. Sometimes, people even come up with reasons.

For example, many of you remember that just after the Haiti earthquake, televangelist Pat Robertson had an answer to that perplexing question ... how could this bad thing happen? It was easy, Robertson said. Haitians back in history had made a pact with the devil in order to win their independence. Now God was punishing them. God made the earth quake in Haiti

Or after 9/11, when Jerry Falwell claimed the terrorist attacks were God's vengeance upon this nation for taking prayer out of school and keeping abortion safe and legal, and tolerating homosexuality. God let 9/11 happen in order to punish our nation.

These prominent conservative preachers looked at tragedy and saw the wrath of God, a wrath that appropriately expressed their own theologies and ideologies.

Others looked at these same tragedies and saw other, more unsettling forces at play. Hugo Chavez, the leader of Venezuela, accused the United States of causing the Haiti earthquake with a clandestine weapons test. And conspiracy theories abound about the 9/11 attacks, with the most horrifying scenario being that the United States government actually blew up the World Trade Center itself, in order to provide a justification for going to war with Iraq.

Why do bad things happen? Is God punishing us? Is someone out to get us? Who is to blame when calamity strikes? Human beings want to know, we desperately want to know. We want there to be meaning in meaningless acts of death and destruction. We want there to be a purpose, a reason we can wrap our minds around.

And even in first-century Palestine, people wanted to know. They wanted to know “Why?” Why did Pilate send soldiers to kill faithful Galileans as they offered sacrifices in the Jewish Temple? Had they done something terribly bad to be slaughtered so? Was God punishing the Jewish people that the Romans should abuse them in this way, in the Temple, during worship?

David Aaronovitch, who has written a book about conspiracy theories called *Voodoo Histories*, says we demand an answer to the question, “how could this happen?” because, he says, “it is more bearable that terrible events should be the result of a big conspiracy than the blind cruelty of the world.”

But that is all Jesus offers in reply. The blind cruelty of the world. No conspiracies, no vengeance, no reason at all. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No.” And then he ups the ante, because the attack in the Temple was done by humans, but what about your average everyday horrible disaster where no one is to blame? Does God make random bad things happen to people?

Jesus has an anecdote at hand -- a tower near the Jerusalem city wall that must have toppled for no visible reason one day. He says, “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? No.”

There’s no rhyme or reason in such events. They happen. People suffer, people die. God does not give someone cancer and then turn around and cure someone else. God does not allow Pontius Pilate or Josef Stalin or Saddam Hussein a certain allotment of time to terrorize the people because the people were bad. We live in a broken and imperfect world, Jesus says. No one is any more or less a sinner than anyone else. No one gets punished any more or any less than anyone else.

But, Jesus DOES say, and this is the big caveat here ... “unless you repent you will all perish as they did.” Oh, so there is a quid pro quo with God then, right? We repent and Pilate won’t slaughter us, towers won’t fall on us, terrorists won’t attack us and the earth will stop shaking?

No. Even if you repent it won’t keep you from perishing, sooner or later. But unless you repent, Jesus says, you will all perish as they did.

***As they did.* Those people all perished suddenly, when they least expected it. Heedlessly, thinking they had all the time left in the world. Never imagining that the blind cruelty of the world might suck them up one day. Never thinking they wouldn’t get a chance to say, “I’m sorry.” Or “I love you.” Or “You are forgiven.”**

It was so powerful, so overwhelming, on that beautiful, cloudless September morning, when skyscrapers fell and the Pentagon burned ... it was so incredible, that the messages that poured out of those places were those last-minute messages of love and reconciliation. People who could get through ... on a cell phone or a landline ... called the people who meant the most to them and said, “This is really weird and I don’t think I’m going to get out, but I want you to know that I love you.”

Or as my father died, and then a few months later my mother ... as my sister held the phone close to their ears, I said over and over again, “I love you. You know I love you. You were a great dad. You were a great mom. I love you.”

When time runs short, we want to make it right. We want to find meaning in our time here on earth. We want to experience peace. We want to share love.

Trouble is, we think we’ve got all the time in the world. We think we have all the time in the world to coast along, to hold our grudges, to take each other for granted, to rush home from work, slam the garage door shut and miss the sunset. We think we have all the time in the world to help the homeless, or to write that novel, or to tutor a child, or to speak up about a terrible wrong.

We think we have all the time in the world to nurse our secret dream along inside our heads, without ever taking a chance to make it a reality. We think we have all the time in the world to say those precious words: “I’m sorry. I love you. You are forgiven.”

Unless you repent, Jesus says, you will all perish as they did – Galileans in the Temple, Jerusalemites passing beneath a tower. Die as they did, unknowing, unthinking ... unshriven, as they used to say in medieval times. Heirs to a thousand missed opportunities, a thousand risks not dared, a thousand roads not taken.

And so the overarching question turns out not to be the one question WE think is so important. The overarching question turns out to be not *why* – not “Why do bad things happen?” The question we must answer is *how* – “In a world where bad things do happen, in a world where all of us must die and none of us know the day or the hour of our end, HOW – how are we to live?”

What we must repent of, then, is all the many ways we have failed to make that HOW happen. We must repent of all the ways we have continued to just take up space, like the fig tree in the parable, not believing that we could be chopped to the ground at any time. We must repent of all the times that we thought we had all the time.

Because if we do repent ... from the Greek word *metanoia*, which means simply to turn around and go the other way ... if we do repent, if we do choose to turn, to change direction, to wake up, to live our lives instead of sleepwalking through them, to take up our commission of carrying on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world ... if we do that, then we set our feet on a pathway that leads ... not to remorse, and punishment and humiliation, but to joy.

The Christian vision of repentance arcs toward joy. Toward fulfillment and wholeness and peace. If we repent, then we can change. If we change, then we can grow. If we can grow, then we can begin to become the people God always imagined we could be, doing the work God has always called us to do. After all, wouldn’t you rather be a fruity tree, than just a stick in the ground that takes up space?

Mary Oliver, in her poem “A Summer’s Day”, puts it this way.
She writes:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?