

“The Path: Traversing Obstacles”

24 March 2019: 3rd Sunday in Lent

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 13:1-9

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“It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those we intend to commit” (—Josh Billings).

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Regarding something like “natural evil,” Thomas Hobbes said: “Life is nasty, brutish and short.” Yet, we 21st century folks imagine that we can somehow fix the “bad things that happen to good people”—like us. Walter Brueggemann writes:

[An] . . . insistence on the reality of brokenness flies in the face of the Enlightenment practice of denial. Enlightenment rationality, in its popular, uncriticized form, teaches that with enough reason and resources, brokenness can be avoided. And so Enlightenment rationality, in its frenzied commercial advertising, hucksters the goods of denial and avoidance: denial of headaches and perspiration and loneliness, impotence and poverty and shame, embarrassment and, finally, death. In such ideology there are no genuinely broken people. When brokenness intrudes into such an assembly of denial, as surely it must, it comes as failure, stupidity, incompetence, and guilt. The church, so wrapped up in the narrative of denial, tends to collude in this. When denial is transposed into guilt—into personal failure—the system of denial remains intact and uncriticized, in the way Job’s friends defended “the system” (W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Fortress, 1997, p. 560).

Sometimes we hear people suggest that God is “not fair.” An ideal Lenten question is: “are humans in a position to judge whether or not God is fair?” If God permits such questioning, then what criterion/yardstick defines fair? How do Christians handle issues of “equity?” How should we respond to accusations against God? I raise this issue today because Luke presents the topic of “theodicy” via our day’s lesson.

“Theodicy” is a fancy theological word that chiefly has to do with God’s justice in a plainly unjust world. We might be surprised that “theodicy” describes more average run-of-the-mill theological questions entertained by everyday citizens than all other questions about God put together and multiplied by 10. Questions about theodicy usually sound like: What did we do to deserve this? Or why did this happen to us? Theodicy is a doctrine that explains the God’s justice in a world where evil exists. We ask such questions about theodicy in funeral homes and at hospitals. I’ve spent a lot of time the last four decades pondering how to answer such questions, but truthfully, few suitable answers exist. As clearly an occupational hazard, preachers face such questions continually. Why couldn’t my children stay married? Why did my husband get cancer? Why do children have to go to bed hungry? Why does God allow war?

Like you, I am guilty of asking these kinds of natural questions about the way things are. Inquiring minds want to know. We want to know why the good suffer. We want to know why bad things happen to good people and why—and worse—why do good things happen to bad people. The psalmist speaks for us all:

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.

For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked (Psalm 73:2-3).

When some present asked Jesus questions about suffering, I felt reassured as a preacher. The questions brought listeners made a natural assumption connecting suffering and sin. We still cling to “the deuteronomic theology” which suggests the covenant with Yahweh promises Israel the land of Canaan. Yet, the promise is qualified: if the Israelites are unfaithful, they will lose the land. Deuteronomic theology explains Israel’s success/failure as a result of faithfulness/disobedience. People also extend this to individuals (see John 9:2). Hear our day’s lesson:

1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or 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? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did” (Luke 13:1-5).

Forgive me, but I don’t get it. People listen to Jesus teach and ask several valid questions about suffering. The first question pertained to worshipping Galileans. As Roman soldiers quelled a civil commotion, they caught some Galileans in a crossfire. When Luke employs the phrase “whose blood was mingled with their sacrifices,” it implies that all the Galileans were doing was worshipping God. Thus, the question: Why did those who were at worship die over a matter with which they had nothing to do? Jesus’ answer is abrupt, if not cruel: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Then Jesus goes a further step and addressing the tower of Siloam falling on eighteen people, killing them instantly. Perhaps workers, perhaps not, but whatever they were doing a great tragedy occurred. All were killed. Did Jesus wring his hands? Did he say the tragedy was a shame? No, he asked whether those who died were worse sinners than all the others who happened to be in Jerusalem. Answering his own question, Jesus said again: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

In these two examples, Jesus pretty well covers the waterfront of human suffering. The first example was undeserved suffering meted out by a military occupying force. Example two was a natural disaster. Consequently, to the question of suffering—inflicted by people or nature—Jesus’ answer is both direct and brutal. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” The people want to know why this tragedy has happened to others. Jesus obliges them to examine their own lives—with a parable:

6 Then 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. 7 So 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?’ 8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down’ ” (Luke 13:6-9)

People ask Jesus about human suffering. Jesus tells a parable. The parable divides neatly into two parts. The first part addresses the question about what to do with a non-productive fig tree. The tree

has not produced for three years, although the owner looked for figs for three years. For us “three years” specifies the time the owner has granted the tree to produce figs. All the watering and care have yielded nothing. So, according to the owner, there is only one alternative: “Cut it down.” This is a practical approach. A non-productive fig tree is about as useful as a non-producing oil rig. Why put time, energy, and resources into something that will never produce? This is good common-sense attitude; a conventional wisdom approach to a problem.

But a second part of the parable surprises us. The vinedresser, surely subordinate to the owner, negotiates on behalf of the hapless plant. He offers to dig around the roots and apply fertilizer (or manure/dung) to help the plant reach its potential. The vinedresser goes far beyond what we might expect for his role—that is of a slave or servant who cares for plants. The upshot is, he pleads clemency for the fig tree and thus provides a “last chance” for the tree.

Returning to the core of the parable, the people who listen to Jesus want to know about other people’s suffering. Yet, Jesus forces them to look at their own lives. In fact, Jesus almost forces them to ask themselves what they will do with their second chance. Neither Pilate’s soldiers nor a tower falling on them has killed those who ask the questions. But they could have died this way. So now, Jesus’ parable implies: What now are you going to do with your second chance?

This is a Lenten question for us today. Certainly, we can sit around and ask why did this or that happen, but more practically we might ask instead, “since this did not happen to me, then what will I do with my second chance?” So . . . today, ask yourself, “What am I doing with the chance that God has given me?”

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