

When Good Things Happen to Bad People

Luke 13:1-9

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

February 28, 2016 – The Third Sunday of Lent



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. As you might remember, a few years back the people of Haiti experienced a major earthquake, next came an earthquake in Chili, then an earthquake in Taiwan, a fire in Dallas, and on, and on, and on. Every week, it seems there's a news story spelling out a major disaster somewhere in the world where men, women, and children are swept away or perish suddenly through no fault of their own. People see these stories – you and I see these stories – and we ask: "Why? Why did these awful things happen to seemingly innocent people?" Well, back in the 80's there was a rabbi by the name of Harold Kushner who wrote a book which took up that very issue. It was titled, not surprisingly: "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People." I remember reading some sections from the book, but the questions it raised are nothing new – and in fact, they could be reduced to just two, namely: "Is God powerful enough to deal with evil in the world?" And: "If God is all-powerful, why does He allow these kinds of things to happen?"

In Jesus' day, of course, we didn't have MSNBC, CNN or the Fox News Channel. People weren't being bombarded 24/7 with satellite, cable, Facebook, Twitter, and the Internet reporting in graphic, chilling detail all the suffering and disasters from around the world. But people still had an awareness of what was going on. There were ways of transmitting accounts of major news events. As these reports were passed along by word of mouth, people back then also asked the very same question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

And is that not the very thing we see before us in this morning's text, where Jesus is told about some "Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices?" Perhaps because Jesus was from Galilee, these people thought He would want to know about this incident where a group of Galileans were killed by some of Pilate's soldiers who rushed in and cut them down while they were worshipping in the Temple. I think it's safe to say Jesus' reply wasn't what they expected. "Do you think that these Galileans," He asked them, "were worse sinners than all the others because they suffered in this way? I tell you no!" He also asked about the eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them. "Were they worse," He asked, "than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!"

Here's where we gain insight into the difference in thinking between 1st and 21st Century people. In our day when bad things happen to someone, we either think

something bad about God – that He's not good enough or powerful enough to prevent it – or else we think something good about the people – perhaps that they'll automatically get a free ticket to heaven because they were innocent. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when nearly 3,000 people lost their lives in one day, Oprah Winfrey proclaimed that thousands of "angels were added to the spiritual roster." Our own David Benke prayed that God would "extend Jacob's ladder for those who ascended the stairways to save us" – as though dying in the line of duty were some sort of qualification for heaven. So in our day we think that when bad things happen to people, they must have been good.

But people viewed things differently in Jesus' day. They tended to think that when bad things happened to people, they must have been especially bad. Hence the mindset of the people in this morning's Gospel seems to have been that those particular people must have been especially bad for God to punish them so. And lying right below that assumption is this one: "Well, I'm glad I'm a better person than those poor devils! God must like me!" So Jesus takes that attitude head on. He doesn't deny that the Galileans or the tower victims were sinners – indeed, He acknowledges that they were. But Jesus also makes it clear that you can't conclude they were "worse sinners" simply because of what happened to them.

And notice how Jesus answers His own question: "Were they worse sinners?" "No!" He says, "But unless *you* repent, you will all likewise perish." Jesus shifts their attention from the faults of others to themselves. "Unless *you* repent, you will likewise perish." These people were already thinking about death and God's judgment – but only in terms of others. So our Lord used this occasion to direct them to their own mortality and guilt. The ancients believed bad things happened to bad people – and because some were worse sinners than others, worse things were likely to happen to them. Moderns believe bad things happen to good people, and the reason why is because either something must be wrong with God, or there must be something good about the people. Whatever the case, those who think that way usually see themselves either as good in comparison to others – or that they are simply good all by themselves – but certainly they think they're good enough, and that God must love them for their goodness.

But, what does God's word say? First, it says that God is both good and powerful. There's nothing wrong with Him. Scripture further teaches that it's impossible to draw

conclusions about how good or bad a person is on the basis of what might happen to them. In this life bad things happen to bad people, bad things happen to relatively decent people, and bad things happen to good people. The Bible also teaches that ultimately, in God's eyes – and according to His righteous Law – there is no such thing as a “good person.” There are no good people! We are all bad! We are all sinners. We are all lost because we have all sinned against God and “justly deserve His temporal and eternal punishment.” Were it not for God's grace, we would all surely perish eternally in hell. And it's only when you realize this that you are ready to receive God's grace.

So, are there any who are “worse” sinners? In a certain sense – humanly speaking – yes, of course. Some people do things which are more harmful and destructive to the human community than others. And we all like to point out people like that and cluck our tongues because it makes us feel we're not as bad as they are! But before God no sinner is any worse than any another. We have all rebelled against God in thought, word, and deed – secretly and openly – over and over again – every day. We all want to be our own God and make our own decisions about what's right and wrong. But all that does is show how much our sinful nature hates God, rebels against God, and deserves His wrath. That's why Jesus says: “Unless you repent, you will likewise perish.” Don't just look at others to see how bad they are. Look at yourself. Repent of your own sin, your own sinfulness. Repent, or perish eternally!

This call to repentance shows us that God doesn't want any to perish. Otherwise, why would He warn us? Warnings are helpful – they can even be life-saving. For example, the warning label on a bottle of pills can keep you from taking a fatal dose. The “Danger!” sign on a partially frozen lake can keep you from skating out onto thin ice and drowning in freezing water. A parent's sharp words: “Stop!” can keep a child from running out in the street and being hit by a car. These warnings are given not to spoil our fun, but to save our life. So God warns us. Jesus warns us: “Repent or perish!” Jesus cares about us. He loves us, and that's why He tells us the truth about ourselves.

But sadly, most of the time, all we want is to feel good about ourselves. We'd just as soon bypass that whole repentance thing. Regardless of our feelings, however, Jesus continues calling on us to repent, to mourn, to turn from our sin, and to receive the forgiveness and life earned for us by His work on the cross. That's what repentance is all about, after all: dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. That's what you have been Baptized into dear child

of God: daily repentance and daily rising with Christ to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. And so the warning comes to you once again this morning: “Repent or perish.” And God's grace is what causes Him to call you to repentance. He doesn't rush in like one of Pilate's soldiers to cut you down without warning. Rather, He comes to alert you to the danger sin poses, and to graciously point you to the way of life. God doesn't want any to perish, but that all should repent and be saved. “For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

So, there it is – just as plain as the nose on your face – the way God provided for us all by grace through faith in His Son – so that you would not have to perish. Faith, you see, is the “flip side” of repentance. You don't just turn from your sin, but you turn from your sin to Jesus Christ and trust that He will do for us all as He promised. The innocent victims we read about in our Gospel this morning weren't just some “Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices.” There was another Galilean, Jesus of Nazareth, who also would suffer a bloody death under Pontius Pilate. Jesus shed His blood, not *with* His sacrifice, but *as* the sacrifice for your sins and mine. Was *this* Galilean – this Jesus – a “worse sinner than all the others” because He suffered in this way? No, Jesus was the Innocent Victim, the only perfectly innocent One. He committed no sin of His own, but carried all our sin with Him to the cross. Jesus was the One Good Person who willingly died in the place of all us bad people, and so St. Paul speaks rightly when he says of Him that He became a Curse for us that we might become righteous for His sake. He alone bore the full weight of your sin as He took our place, our punishment, and the judgment we all deserve. He died so that you would not perish, but live eternally.

So this morning we began with a question: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” But that's the wrong question. The right question is: “Why should anything good happen to bad people – bad people like us?” And in God's Word – in His Gospel – we hear the answer to this question: Good things do indeed happen to bad people because Christ came into our world to suffer and die for sinners like you and me. And that, dear friends, that is Good News – namely, that these good things – forgiveness, new life, and everlasting life – are now yours in Christ Jesus. Believe it and live. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.