

Lent 3C 2022 Sermon

March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1 *At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." 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. 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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

Rabbi Harold Kushner's son Aaron died at the age of 14 of progeria, a very rare genetic disorder characterized by rapid aging, leading to death by late childhood or early teens. Rabbi Kushner found himself asking, How could God let this happen to him and his wife, who were good people; and to Aaron, who was an innocent child? Like so many of us, Kushner believed that God rewards those who do good, and punishes (or allows bad things to happen to) people who do bad. Kushner's efforts in trying to come to grips with the death of his son led him to write the New York Times Bestselling Book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

The question of why, if God is loving, just, and all-powerful, bad things happen to good people is one of the most often-asked questions humans have raised for millennia.

Author Jared Byas writes, "the do-good/get-good do-bad/get-bad way of thinking... helps us organize our life... It gives us an equation to make sense of God. It is a divine algebra. If I do good, good happens. If I do bad, bad happens. $A+B=C...$ "

"In my [religious] tradition growing up," Byas continues, "all our national woes were because we had 'gotten away from God.' The Columbine school shooting was because we took prayer out of school, the stock market crashing was because we voted in a Democrat as President, hurricanes and floods were caused by allowing gay people to have rights."¹ Even today, we read that the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow believes that the war in Ukraine is somehow God's will because Ukraine had become too westernized, allowing Gay Pride Parades, which are abhorrent to God. There are some people who believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is God's retribution for the greed and hedonism of our Western society. In the early 1980's some people believed that the AIDS

epidemic was God's punishment on gays and prostitutes. And I've actually heard someone say to a mother whose infant just died, "God needed an extra angel in heaven." God is all-powerful, we think; therefore, God must be the cause behind everything. But what if, as I suggested in last week's sermon, we think of God not so much as "All-powerful," but as "All-vulnerable?"

The Bible is filled with chapters and verses that reflect a do-good/get-good do-bad/get-bad way of thinking. The Book of Deuteronomy has this formula as one of its main themes.² The whole Book of Job struggles with this issue of why bad things happen to Job, who was so good.

And, we see this mindset in the *New Testament* also. But when we do, Jesus is right there to correct that mindset. In John's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are passing by a man who had been born blind, and the disciples ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus responds, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned..." (Jn 9:1-3) In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matt. 5:45)

And then we come to today's Gospel. Two tragic events have just happened: Pilate had ordered certain Jews from Galilee to be killed while they were in the very process of offering their animal sacrifices in the Temple. And then, there were those 18 people who were crushed when a tower fell on them. Jesus knows that his listeners are thinking that these deaths were God's punishment for some egregious sins. But Jesus severs that connection: "Do you think these people who suffered were worse sinners than all the other people? No, I tell you..." No, I tell you.

"But," Jesus continues, "unless you repent, you will likewise perish."

Wait a minute! Jesus has just said that the victims of the Temple tragedy and the tower tragedy were not being punished because they were worse sinners than everyone else. He has clearly severed the connection between tragedy and sin. But now he seems to *re-establish* that connection for his listeners, saying that unless they repent, they will likewise perish? What is going on here?

First, let me say that I don't for a moment think that Jesus is threatening the crowd with *literal* perishing, any more than I think Jesus was speaking literally when he said, "If your hand offends you, cut it off; if your eye offends you, pluck it out." (Matthew 5:29, 18:9; Mark 9:47) Nor was he speaking literally when he said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." (Lk 14:26) In each of these instances, he is using the common rabbinic teaching technique of hyperbole, exaggerating and *shocking* his listeners in order to drive home a point.³

One of our problems, I think, in making sense of this Gospel passage, is that we tend to hear the word “repent” and think that it means, “shape up and act good.” But that is NOT what the word “repent” means. Quite literally, the word repent (*metanoeo* in the original Greek New Testament) means “to change your mind.” And, as the word is used by Jesus, it means more than just changing your *mind*; it means a transformation of one’s very life! One English Bible (NCV) translates the word “repent” this way: “change your hearts and lives;” another reads, “change the way you think and act.” (GW)

What Jesus is doing with the crowd in today’s Gospel is re-directing their focus. The crowd is asking Jesus about those Galileans Pilate had slaughtered and those others who were crushed by the falling tower; but Jesus knows that *no one is ever spiritually transformed by focusing on “those others.”* No one is ever changed by the question, “What about *them*?” Indeed, after Jesus’ resurrection in John’s Gospel, Peter asks Jesus about what is going to happen to one of the other disciples, and Jesus responds, “What is that to you? Your calling is to follow me!” (John 21:21-22)

We love to focus on the **other** person’s sin, the **other** group’s sin, the **other** nation’s sin; hone in on **other** people’s situations, pass judgment on them, while avoiding important changes needed in our own lives. We love to see the speck in the other person’s eye while ignoring the log in our own eye. (Luke 6:41-42) John Shea says about the crowd in today’s Gospel, “They are asking about the fate of *others*, and suddenly [Jesus faces them] with their **own** fate... People must look *inside* to be in touch with the will of God and *then* make that will [of God] happen in the events of their [own] lives. **They** are the ones who bring God’s will onto the earth. ...Leave to the fabrications of the mind the question of whether terrible events are God’s will. The will of God that is *beyond* debate is that **we** change and produce fruit, that **we** bring heaven to earth.

“[For] the divine will is not in outer events, but in the soul where the person is connected to God. The path of contacting and enacting the divine will is [**first**] to go within and *then* to go out.”⁴ When we first connect and unite with God and God’s Spirit within our own souls, *then* when we **act** in the world, God’s will is done in and through us.

Jesus uses a gardening image in our Gospel, saying that the Divine Gardener will do everything in her power to cultivate and nourish the fig tree (us) in order to help it bear fruit – to help it “bear God’s being and love into the world.”⁴ We are to let the Divine Gardener do her work in the garden of our souls. Loosening up the soil that has bound our roots so tightly that no life-giving air can get in. Spreading manure around us. Pruning us where needed. This is the **true** work of repentance, and it is the Divine Gardener who does most of the heavy lifting. *Our* part is to keep the gate to the Garden Plot of our soul open for her to come and go and do her work in us. When we keep the gate of our soul open to the Divine Gardener, inviting her to do her work of cultivating, fertilizing, and pruning, then

that divine life implanted in us from the time we were a seed will grow, and the fruit of God's love will be borne on our branches for the feeding of a love-starved world.

AMEN

¹ “Why God Isn’t Always Behind Our Successes or Failures (Thankfully),” <https://peteenms.com/why-god-isnt-always-behind-our-successes-or-failures-thankfully/>

² Byas, *ibid*: “Deuteronomy 28 is such a clear example: ‘If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God:’ (28:1-2) These two verses are followed by 12 more that just list all the wonderful things that will happen to you if you do good things and obey God.

“Then verse 15 begins: ‘However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you:’ This verse is then followed by 53, yes you heard that right, FIFTY-THREE, more verses that list all the awful curses that will happen to you if you do bad things and disobey God.”

³ “Rabbi Ammi said, The Torah Speaks in hyperbole, the prophets speak in hyperbole and the Sages speak in hyperbole.” – from The Talmud

⁴ John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 76-80