

“A New Approach to Scary News”

Luke 13:1-9

The mother had gone to her young son’s bedside in answer to his frightened call. The thunder, the lightning, the rain on the window scared him. After rendering comfort, the mother prepared to leave stirring her young son’s request: “Can’t you sleep with me?” “No,” mother replied, “you will be okay; and I need to sleep with Daddy.” Lips turned downward, the little guy replied, “the big baby!”

Plenty scares us in our world today. When we hear today’s text, we realize it has always been a scary world. Jesus spoke of current events, and the headline stories 2,000 years ago were bad news, too. “Imperial troops murder pilgrims at worship.” “Tower collapses; kills eighteen.”

Our Lord pointed to two current events as a way of introducing and commenting upon a parable about a barren fig tree. Luke commonly does this—gives the interpretation at the beginning rather than the end. The two sayings are exactly parallel, each ending with the pronouncement, “but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” But the differences in the two sayings combine to make them inclusive in their application

The first has to do with Galileans, the second Jerusalemites. Jesus is speaking, therefore, to all persons. The first has to do with a tragedy caused by a human being, the second with tragedy caused by natural calamity. Thus, Jesus is including all the violence and suffering that strikes without reason or meaning.

Jesus raises a rhetorical question: “did these persons sin more than others?” Behind it is an assumption prevalent in Jesus’ time and still today: illness, poverty, disease, disaster and death are the punishment for sins known or unknown. In John’s Gospel (9:2), the disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The question assumed that there was a direct correlation between sin and suffering. To those disciples and in today’s text, Jesus denied that direct correlation.

For Christians, Golgotha was the fatal blow to the idea that suffering and death come to those who deserve it. The One without sin suffered and died on the cross. Some present took that as proof that he was not the Son of God. But all who are disciples of Jesus are forever freed from the ancient notion that prosperity and good health are evidence of divine favor, and that poverty and suffering are clear signs of God’s wrath. Even so, the idea persists.

Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* tells the story of a priest's effort to prove that the reason a bridge collapsed with certain persons on it was to be found in the moral flaws in the lives of those persons. Of course, his efforts and all such efforts fail. Jesus rejects all such efforts to assign blame, not simply because they are futile, but because they deflect attention from the real issue—the obligation of every person to live in penitence and trust before God without linking one's loyalty to God to life's sorrows or joys. *All persons* are to repent or perish.

Then comes the parable of the barren fig tree. The theme is as old as the prophets. The case is made that the garden, the vineyard, or in this case, the fig tree, is not producing fruit. It is not serving the purpose for which it was planted. The care given to it seems wasted. Why not put the soil to better use? But the gardener intervenes and pleads for time and for his own opportunity to nurture the plant to fruitfulness. The gardener calls not only for mercy and patience, but also for nurture and care.

But if, as I think, Jesus is referring to himself as the gardener, then this story is not to be examined in isolation. It has everything to do with the destination just before Jesus. Jerusalem awaits him, and his death on a tree. Taken in the broader context of Jesus' own death, the story of the Galileans killed by Pilate becomes more meaningful. Jesus does not need to repent, yet he suffers the same fate of a cruel death at the order of the same person—Pilate. When he talks of perishing as they did, he is talking about something that the reader of the Gospel must realize Jesus is himself going to do.

This Gardener took on the fate of all humanity, our suffering and our death, head on. He not only tends to the tree, but dies on a tree. He suggests that being cut off from God is a terrible fate, and then he endures that fate with us and for us. By joining us in our suffering, Jesus does not answer the questions about why we suffer. Instead he lives it. He shows us that suffering and death do not have the last word. Beyond our ability to comprehend is something greater still, of which by his death we can only catch a glimpse.

This passage is extremely appropriate for the Lenten journey. It is an urgent call to repentance, a turning from sin and a reformation of action and attitude. This theme appears in Luke more than in any other New Testament writer. The fig tree is also very characteristic of Luke in its appeal for mercy that stays the hand of judgment. Jonah is a favorite story of Luke and the grace that spared wicked Nineveh, even though that city was also under the judgment of God.

In fact, the good news Luke proclaims is stated clearly at the end of his Gospel (24:47): ***“that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”***

Today in our youth membership class our theme is repentance. The word may have lost some of its power for us. Repentance is much more than being sorry for our sins. In it is contained a sense of completely altering the basic motivation and direction of one’s life. When we find ourselves driving down the wrong road, it is possible we may feel bad, but keep on going anyway. We might even pull to the side of the road and vent our feelings of lost-ness. This could be considered the beginnings of repentance; however, it only becomes repentance when we turn around and start going the other way.

Repentance (*metanoia*) involves a two-fold turn—a turn away from sin and a turn to God for forgiveness and a new life. This common Greek word meant literally “to change one’s mind.” If we are to discover the good news that Jesus has for us, we are called to see the world from a totally different perspective. As participants in God’s reign and God’s good will for the world, we are called to come at everyday events in a new and different way.

One of the first things we can let God help us to change is our tendency to imagine that we can judge from appearances: to think that if someone suffers, “They had it coming,” and that if they prosper, “God is blessing them.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made the point clearly: ***“I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”***

One of the justifications for colonialism, foreign domination, and economic exploitation is looking at “underdeveloped” parts of the world and assuming that underdevelopment is because of shortcomings of the local people. So, invasion, expanding new markets, teaching them correctly, become justified and so very much is often destroyed or lost of great worth.

You can go almost anywhere in the United States and buy fresh cut flowers, especially roses, grown in Zimbabwe, half a world away. Next to Holland, Zimbabwe has become the world’s second largest producer of fresh cut flowers. They are beautiful, but the flower farms are owned by multinational corporations which employ the local persons as minimally paid workers. Always an exporter of food, Zimbabwe now has to import staples. Drought is a factor; but so is the conversion of farmland from food production to the cultivation of flowers controlled by foreign interests. When these people suffer food shortages or starve,

are they worse sinners than us? “Of course not,” Jesus said, “but unless you repent...”

This is the painful part of seeing things from God’s point of view. It is cheap and easy to criticize others, but it is very painful to look at ourselves. What part do I play in economic systems that exploit other people? How do I perpetuate attitudes that demean others? How have I contributed to the pain and suffering of another person—even a farmer half a world away?

So scary stories about the tragedies and misfortunes of others are certainly not cause for us to assume persons brought these things on themselves. But neither are they neutral stories that we can shrug off. They are wake-up calls for each of us to examine our hearts, our relationship with God, and our involvement with other people on this planet for we are all mortals.

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus reminds us that by God’s grace, while we have life, we have been offered yet another chance to make a choice:

- another chance to allow the things of Christ to be decisive in our lives;
- another chance to be instruments not of revenge but of reconciliation;
- another chance to work not for the withering but the widening of our circles of compassion;
- another chance to achieve not the narrowing but the nurturing of our communities of faith;
- another chance not to be cynical but to engage in the uplifting practice of hope;
- another chance to listen not for the noisy shout but for the still, small voice of God’s calming presence.

Jesus demonstrated that God’s response to our suffering is not indifference but to join us in it. We may never fully understand it all, but we know now that unexplained suffering and pain are not our journey’s destination. So, we cling to our beloved Gardener, as if our very lives depended on him. Because, I suppose, in every sense they do.