

Isaiah 55:1-9
Luke 13:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent
Midway Presbyterian Church
March 24, 2019

Repent and Bear Fruit

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Lent is a time for introspection and repentance. But it's also a time for joy, as reflected in our Old Testament Lesson for this Third Sunday in Lent. Hear the joy that springs forth through a prophet's declaration of God's mercy, freely available to all. Listen to these words from Isaiah 55:1-9...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson begins with reference to two recent tragic happenings: Galileans who have been killed by Pilate's brutality; and eighteen people who have died as a result of the collapse of the tower of Siloam, a tower in the old wall around Jerusalem. Jesus is told about the events and responds. Then he continues with the parable of The Fig Tree. Listen to these words from Luke 13:1-9...

Sermon

Thornton Wilder's second novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, was published in 1927 and won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1928. It's the story of the finest bridge in all Peru—an Incan rope-fiber suspension bridge which collapsed on July 20, 1714, taking five people to their death. Brother Juniper, a Franciscan missionary, happens to witness the tragedy, and asks the central question of the novel: "Why did this happen to those five individuals?" Juniper sets out to explore the lives of the five victims, and try to understand why they died. Ironically, the search will lead to his own death.

Harold Kushner's book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, was published in 1978. It, too, dealt with the problem of innocent suffering and was dedicated to the memory of his young son Aaron who died at the age of 14 of the incurable genetic disease, progeria.

Kushner, a conservative Jewish Rabbi, said that he no longer held God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters,

...because I realize that I gain so little and lose so much when I blame God for those things...The question we should be asking is not "Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?" That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be "Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?"

No, "Why me?" is not a question confined to more primitive times. I can recall visiting a church member in the hospital and hearing the statement, "God must be punishing me for something."

I read about a pediatrician who specializes in palliative care. That means that a significant portion of her work includes helping children with terminal diseases to die well, and supporting their families in the process. It is grueling, sad work. After each patient's death, the palliative care team brings together all the medical staff who cared for the patient. Especially for those workers unaccustomed to the death of their young patients, this meeting seems is unsettling. They arrive with their defenses high, but after a few minutes, the medical teammates realize the gathering is for sharing stories, acknowledging pain, and providing an opportunity to "be real" about what they are feeling. Tears flow. Hugs are given and received.

What strikes the pediatrician about these meetings is the shift that occurs in the short duration of the gathering. Initially, the room is full of anxiety, perhaps expecting the agenda to be about laying blame. After a few short minutes of good leadership, it becomes clear to everyone that the purpose is acknowledging hurt and sadness. The care team must pause and be

honest about our human realities before moving on to give appropriate care, concern, and emotional openness to other patients.

When a child dies of an illness or is killed by a drunk driver, or when a teenager is randomly killed in a drive-by shooting, one cannot fault a parent for asking, “Why did God let this happen?” or, “Where was God?” When such a question is asked, people are not so much looking for information, as they are trying to come to terms with their pain and the meaning of life. Even the psalmists ask such questions, as in Psalm 10:1:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

What is needed is not so much an answer as a shoulder to cry on and arms to embrace.

The answer that Jesus gives in this passage is that those who suffer calamities are not worse sinners than anyone else. When others suffer a tragedy, it should serve as a reminder to all of us that the reason we were spared is not because God loves us more than them. But Jesus points out that we are all sinners and in need of repentance. It’s not others, but as the old spiritual puts it,

Not my sister, not my brother,
But it's me, oh Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.

So in Luke 13 when Jesus spoke to those who came telling of a terrible human event, he answered this way:

“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 just as they did.” (vv. 2-3)

In this text Jesus offers no simplistic answer to a deep and complex question. He neither disputes nor affirms the connection between sin and suffering. After applying the same logic to

another tragic situation wherein 18 people were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, Jesus then tells them to repent or perish.

On the one hand, tragedy sometimes strikes randomly as it did in the case of the Galileans and the eighteen Jerusalemites. In such cases, it has nothing to do with guilt. The tornado that destroys a “house of ill repute” also destroys a House of Worship—kills both a drug dealer and a Sunday School teacher.

On the other hand, sin sometimes does lead to tragedy. Drunk drivers kill innocent people. Abusive people injure their spouses and children. Not all tragedy is the result of sin, but some is. One way to visualize this understanding is to think of a small circle inside a large circle. The large circle is all tragedy. The small circle is tragedy caused by our sin. We cannot prevent random tragedy—that which lies outside the small circle—but Christ calls us to repent so that we might avoid the tragedy of the small circle.

Jesus denies that the Galileans suffered because of their sins, but calls his listeners to repent lest they suffer for theirs. What happened to the Galileans is history, and nothing can be done about it. The fate of Jesus’ listeners, however, is still negotiable. Jesus does not condemn them, but instead his purpose is to save them. Jesus’ listeners have sinned (as we all have), and he calls them to repent so that they might escape disaster.

These two events in Luke 13 both happen quite suddenly. Without warning, worshipers in Jerusalem find themselves overwhelmed by the power of Rome in the person of Pontius Pilate. Without warning, the tower collapses on people who are going about their daily business near the old city wall. No chance of repentance is offered. Therefore, the message is repent while you can. Or in the words of our lesson from Isaiah:

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near. (6:6)

On this Third Sunday in Lent we are reminded that the time is ripe for repentance and restoration; to delay would be a serious mistake. God is not easily found if the seeker is wicked and unrepentant. However, God is merciful to those who return and will abundantly pardon.

Lent challenges us to consider the reality of sin in our lives, and our need for repentance—before it's too late. We may not even be immediately aware of how we have wandered away from God—how life has lost its meaning in the pursuit of grades, or a promotion, or a pay raise, or some form of greener grass on the other side of the fence. Isaiah's words about "seeking the Lord while he may be found," help us to recommit ourselves to God's promise of steadfast love and covenant relationship as the true way for our lives. Whereby God is our God, and we are his children. In the midst of the false promises for the good life, the successful life, or the exciting life that are prevalent in today's world—the promotion of a wide gate and an easy way—Isaiah implores us to call upon God while he is near.

The stark warning of the first five verses of our Gospel Lesson is then followed by a parable that Jesus tells about a gardener who gains a reprieve for a barren fig tree whose owner is ready to cut it down. After all, it is taking up ground that could be used for a productive tree. But the gardener asks for one more year during which he will cultivate and nurture the fig tree. If after a year it still fails to produce, then it can be cut down.

If John the Baptist was a hellfire and brimstone preacher with an urgent message of an imminent judgment, Jesus tempered that word with a proclamation about a God of grace and compassion who lets an unfruitful fig tree stand for another year in the hope of change. Judgment is coming, but the door of mercy is still open. Seek the Lord while he may be found.

In Acts 1, following the resurrection and the forty days of appearances, Jesus then ascended into the clouds of glory. But we find the disciples standing there gazing up into

heaven. And the angels ask them why? The implication is that they and the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, have work to do. There is a gospel to be preached, a ministry of compassionate care to be carried out. So the mission of Jesus continues. For how long, we cannot say, only until he comes again. And of that time we know not. It may well come unexpectedly. For now there is time. Time to seek the Lord. Time to call upon him. Time for the barren to become fruitful.

The good news is that the fig tree is not left alone. There's the faithful gardener who promises to tend and watch over it, reminding us that our repentance and reformation do not occur apart from the watchful care of God—seeking us, calling us, forgiving us, renewing us.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we bend our knees and lift up our hearts, giving glory to God forever. Amen.