

The Third Sunday in Lent  
St. Luke 13:1-9

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The same question and answer almost always come up when there is some sort of tragedy or disaster. Unfortunately, they are the wrong question and answer.

Let's look at the answer first: "Those people who died in the disaster deserved it. They had been living lives of manifest sin for too long, and God had had enough and brought destruction and desolation on them."

There are some, even today, who continue to say the same things. After every earthquake and hurricane, there are those who proclaim that the natural disaster is the wrath of God. Even after less-than-natural disasters (such as the attacks on September 11, 2001), you might remember hearing so-called preachers proclaiming that God is acting out of anger on the people.

And lest you think it's only those people out there who say and think such things, how often does your mind wander off when something like those things happen? Or even when, say, a drunk driver dies in a horrific accident? When something tragic, devastating, or disastrous happens, it must be the wrath of God against those people for the sins they committed. And because you hear and think it, you may just be led to ask the wrong question the moment you hear such news or witness such a horror. Now, there are certainly consequences for actions, such as a drunk driver being injured or killed in an accident. Still, the thought pervades just about every time something bad happens to someone or a group of people: "What did they do to deserve this?"

At the same time, there were times when something disastrous happened by way of the wrath of God. The two greatest examples are the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom and the Babylonian exile. The difference between these two and today's examples is that God sent prophets to warn the people that destruction was coming by way of the Assyrians and Babylonians if the people didn't repent and turn from their evil ways. Such was not the case with the two groups of people in today's Gospel nor the people of New York on September 11. Nevertheless, the thought always pervades: "What did these people do to deserve this?"

Such was the thought posed to Jesus in this morning's Gospel. He had been informed of the tragedy that befell some Galileans while they were making their sacrifices. Pilate's men had entered the temple grounds and executed these Galileans. Their blood was spilled and mixed with that of their sacrifice, an affront and offense; a statement by Pilate that he was in charge.

So, the question was on the minds of the people who told Jesus of this. "What sins did they commit that God would have their blood mixed with that of their sacrifices? How bad must it have been if God allowed this to happen at the hands of Gentile overlords?" Therefore Jesus, knowing their minds, asked the question for them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?" And, so that they are not left wondering, He answers the question right away: "No, I tell you..."

He then takes it out of the political realm. For you see, those Galileans were murdered at the hands of the Romans, who had a reason to do so. They were rebels against Roman rule, and by Roman law, deserved to die. So, from a political point of view, they got what was coming to them. That's why Jesus brought up the tower in Siloam that fell on 18 people, killing them. "[D]o you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?" Again, Jesus quickly answers the question: "No, I tell you..."

In other words, Jesus was telling the people that they were thinking the wrong question. When people die due to political might or tragedy, unless a prophet warns them first, they didn't die because of some gross sins. He is telling you that when people die because of a natural disaster or act of terrorism, they didn't die because they sinned greater than the rest of humanity. He is telling you that tragedies, devastation, or disasters do not happen as an act of God's wrath upon the people who died in them because they were grievous sinners.

"But wait, pastor," you might be thinking right now, "Didn't the Prophet Jesus warn His hearers? Didn't He continue, '[B]ut unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.' If sins, and especially bad sins, do not exact God's wrath, why does Jesus warn the people they would perish like the Galileans and the Siloamites?" For the answer, let me delve into the parable Jesus tells:

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, "Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?" And he answered him, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

In order to understand sin and wrath, and also grace and mercy, Jesus told this parable.

Fig trees and vineyards are common Old Testament metaphors for Jerusalem and Israel. In using both, Jesus is driving home the fact that He is speaking to the people of Israel. In other words, the people being referenced in this parable are the people called by God's name.

The owner of the vineyard and fig tree goes to the tree looking for fruit, but finds none. In frustration, the man, who represents God in His wrath, wants the tree cut down. No need for the fruitless to waste the good earth God gives it.

That's the Law talking. The Law demands obedience, and in that obedience demands outward proof. Do what it says, or die. Produce fruit, or be cut down. Do good according to the Law and be rewarded; do evil and be punished. The Law is logical like that. And because the Law is logical, it's easier to grasp (though that doesn't directly translate into being easier to obey).

It's this logic which leads one to ask the question, "What did they do to deserve that?" at a time of catastrophe. It's that logic that leads one to think and some to exclaim that God is especially angry at the victims of a disaster for some gross, grievous, manifest, or continual sins.

The keeper in the parable, who represents God's mercy, has a different idea. He wants to leave it alone for a time and nurture the tree. The Greek word used for "leave it alone" has another meaning: forgive. "Let's forgive the tree and give it some extra nourishment for a time."

That's Gospel talk. In the face of sin and not bearing fruit, the Gospel comes along and says, "you're forgiven." It gives nourishment in the Word and by it the power to bear fruit in keeping with repentance and receive the forgiveness it so freely gives. It is patient and forbearing and merciful!

Mercifulness is illogical. The Law says those who do wrong get punished; they get what they deserve. Mercy says those who do wrong do not get punished; they do not get what they deserve. Then grace comes along, forgiving those who do wrong; giving them what they do not deserve. Grace is even more illogical. And because mercy and grace are illogical, they are difficult to grasp (though that does not directly translate into difficult or impossible to receive).

When Jesus spoke this parable, He spoke it with eyes fixed on Jerusalem, as you heard me say many time last week. In fact, last week's Gospel is just a few short verses after what was read today, wherein Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem..." God would seek from the fig tree of Jerusalem and

Israel the fruit of faith, of trust in Him and His promises; He would send prophet after prophet to Jerusalem. Every time, however, all He found was religion and politics. Yet, He bears with it; He is merciful and gracious, because that's how God does things—so, He gives them more time. "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," the Psalmist wrote. (Psalm 103:8) St. Peter explains, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

That's the reason why Jesus twice said, "[B]ut unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The sins of the Galileans and Siloamites were no worse than the sins of any one else in Galilee or Jerusalem. On the contrary, the tragedies served as reminders that they lived in a sinful world—a world tainted by sin (not any particular sin, but the fallen, imperfect, and unholy condition). The Galileans and Siloamites did not die because of any particular sins they had committed; they died because they lived in a sinful world. Such a tragedy could happen to anyone else living in Galilee or Jerusalem.

It hasn't changed. The victims of natural or less-than-natural disasters commit sins no worse than anyone else. The people of Las Vegas—that so-called sin city—are no more or less sinful than the people of Elizabeth, or any other place in between, whether some disaster befalls the place or the people or not. Among other things, tragic events serve to remind you that you still live in a sinful world. Sometimes, they give you an opportunity to be neighborly to someone in need. (cf. Luke 10:30-37)

The wages of sin is death. So, Jesus calls you to repent. Repent, because worse can happen. Death happens because of sin in the world, but eternal death can happen because of unrepentant sins. The word for repent means to have a change of mind, to re-cognize as I have often heard it described. In repentance, you recognize that death in the here and now is not the worst kind of death, but that there is a death worse than that which happened to the Galileans and Siloamites.

God's wrath for sin is just. Sin is what separates man from God, and He is completely justified in making that separation eternal for sin's sake—the worst death. So, represented by the owner of the vineyard, God is justified in wanting to lay waste the sinful, unfruitful tree. God's love for the sinner is merciful. God's grace is what reunites you with Him, and He is completely merciful in bridging that separation for Christ's sake. So, represented by the keeper, God is merciful to forgive the sinful, unfruitful tree, and gracious to nurture it.

For Christ's sake, God is merciful to bridge the gap of sin that separates you from Him. That bridge is the cross on which Jesus died. That death on the cross is what reunites you with God, what reconciles you to Him.

You can think of it this way: Was Jesus' a worse sinner than anyone else who had died? Did He commit some great offense to deserve to die an excruciating death as a criminal? Absolutely not! Jesus was the perfect, spotless Lamb of God, who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth. (cf. Isaiah 53:9) So, if He was sinless, then there is no way His sins could be worse than those of anyone else. And...absolutely yes! "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin...[who] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree..." (2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:24) So, if He was made to be sin for you and bore your sins—all your sins and the sins of all—in His own body on the tree of the cross, then He was the most despicably vile sinner the world has ever known.

Jesus did not get what He deserved, but it was in no way merciful...for Him. He laid aside receiving what He deserved, eternal life, electing to give it to you who receive Him, and took upon Himself what you deserved, eternal death and separation from God. He was, in essence, the tree cut down, even though He bore the fruit of faithfulness; cut down in the stead of the fruitless tree in the vineyard. However, being God Himself, He would not remain that way for long, for He rose again on the third day so that you who receive Him, who repent of your sins, and are nourished by the fruit of His sacrificial death—forgiveness of sins—would receive the fruit of His resurrection—life eternal in Him.

Therefore, death is not something to be feared. On the contrary, viewing death as the gate to life eternal, we can say with St. Paul and an anonymous poet (Philippians 1:21):

For me to live is Jesus  
To die is gain for me;  
Then when so e'er He pleases,  
I meet death willingly.

While on tour, the Seminary Chorus director would often tell us, "Your job as pastor is to teach your people to die well; for when you've taught them to die well, you've taught them to live well." Therefore, dear hearers, know this: with Jesus, Baptized into His death and resurrection, receiving His Body and Blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, living in His mercy, you can die knowing that you will not die eternally—you become one of the blessed dead in Christ. No, you will not die the eternal death; Christ has borne that punishment for you, and if He has borne it all, there is none left for you. And after you have died, and Jesus returns, you will rise again as He has, fruitful trees in God's eternal vineyard, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.