

**Luke 13:1-9**

Lent 3C + March 24, 2019

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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When Towers Fall

The Word of the Lord from Luke 13:3: Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

There are some present at that very time who tell [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate spilled. They tell Him because they are asking a question: they are asking, "Why did it happen?"

On one level, the answer is obvious. It happened because Pilate is a ruthless, erratic ruler who's prone to bloodshed; but that's not what they're asking. They're asking why it happened to those particular people. More to the point, they're asking why God let it happen to those particular people, or perhaps why God caused it to happen. From Jesus' answers, we know their thinking: they're simplifying the problem of evil down to this: if you behave, God will reward you; and if you misbehave, He will stomp on you. So with these Galileans, what made God stomp so hard?

Jesus' answer is provocative: He says, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Jesus doesn't answer their question of "Why?". He asks a different question, answers "no," and then tells them to repent. Unbidden, Jesus gives them another example: He says, "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?" Once again, He tells them no; and once again, He tells them to repent.

In one example, people are intentionally killed by a violent man; and in the other, a building suddenly collapses and kills. In both cases, the victims weren't worse than other sinners. In both cases, Jesus doesn't explain why it happened; and in both cases, Jesus tells them to repent.

I'm guessing this doesn't satisfy them, but that's because they're asking the wrong questions; and they're asking the wrong questions because they believe the wrong thing. That's why Jesus tells them to repent. They need to stop thinking that you can connect every evil thing that happens to a specific sin. As long as they believe that, they'll believe that they will not suffer trouble as long as they keep their noses relatively clean – at least cleaner than the likes of those killed by Pilate or the tower. But if they believe that, they will be unprepared when they suffer trouble – and they will. If they're still believing the wrong thing at that time, they won't call upon God for mercy. Instead, they'll either despair and avoid God because they believe He is angry, or else they will reject God because they believe He is unfairly cruel.

Perhaps, too, Jesus is telling them to repent of believing that God owes them an explanation. He doesn't call His people to walk by understanding, but by faith; and demanding to know unknowable answers is a good way to shipwreck your faith.

We should note that Jesus goes on to tell this little parable of the fig tree. He says:

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.”

Why a story of a three-year-old fig tree now? Because we’re getting close to the cross. That means it’s been nearly three years since His public ministry began when He was baptized by John the Baptist. It’s been nearly three years since John told the crowds, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance,” and “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Lk. 3:8-9). It’s been three years since John called the people to repentance, and they’re still asking the wrong questions because they believe the wrong things. The time grows nearer for the axe to swing ... but there is still time.

Time for what? Time to bear fruit. And what is that fruit? The fruit is foremost repentance. Jesus bids the people to abandon their faulty understanding of the problem of evil, and He calls them to trust in Him instead – whether times are evil or good.

Bad times lie ahead – times that should forever disprove the notion that you can boil the problem of evil down to “if you behave, God will reward you; and if you misbehave, God will punish you.” On Good Friday, the two most notoriously misbehaving sinners in Jerusalem – Herod and Pilate – will survive, while the innocent Son of God is put to death.

We add two quick notes about Good Friday, lest we oversimplify it and mislead. First, bad behavior may not bring suffering in this life, but eternity is another matter. If Herod and Pilate do not repent before they die and stand before they Lord, they are among those who perish forever.

Second, part of the wonder of the Crucifixion is that, in a world where so much evil seems random and unexplained, God answers why when it comes to the death of His Son. There is a clear cause and effect:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to His own way;  
and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4-6)

Hear that well, take it to heart and ... repent: because when trouble happens to you, this is the answer God certainly gives when you ask, “Why?”

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If we were to update our text with current events, the crowd might tell Jesus about the fifty Muslims who were shot in cold blood by a madman while attending worship in New Zealand. Whenever such a horribly violent incident takes place, the question of “Why?” will always arise. If the crowd told Jesus about this today, His response might well be, “Do you think that these Muslims were worse sinners than other people, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” The Savior might then add, “Or those Nebraskans who drowned in the recent flooding: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who live in the midwest? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

When it comes to tragedies far away, it’s pretty easy to shrug and say, “These things happen,” for better or for worse. But such disasters could happen here too; and if you do not prepare yourself mentally and spiritually for that, they will be far more devastating than they already are. But even if you

are spared terror attacks and natural catastrophes, you will still suffer trouble in this life; and the more acute the suffering, the more likely you are to demand, "Why?"

Sometimes, there is a clear cause and effect. If you find yourself asking why your thumb hurts so badly, it might be because of the hammer in your other hand that just missed the nail. If you're asking why you suffer chronic health problems in later years, it might be because of what you did to your body in the many years before. If you have a tough time finding a decent job, it could be because you weren't particularly prone to learning while you were in school. Sometimes, when trouble happens, the cause is easy to find because it looks back at you in every mirror.

Sometimes, the evil you suffer is not your fault, but the fault of others. You might be in a wreck because the other driver was texting; or sick because your co-worker gave you the flu. Sometimes, you suffer evil because of the malice of others, like the terrorist, the school shooter, the pickpocket or the abuser. Sometimes, you'll suffer because you're in a culture that has turned away from the Lord; and in such a place, bad things happen both because people do damaging things and because the Lord pours out a bit of His wrath to warn against sin. We currently live in a nation that entertains a special rage against God's design and gifts of sexuality, marriage and life, to the point that several state legislatures have recently legalized infanticide. These are the sorts of sins for which Old Testament Israel fell; and the fact that our nation remains is proof of God's longsuffering. But judgment will come; and when nations suffer God's judgment, in small or large doses, His people within suffer too.

In all of these cases, you can point to various causes, but it won't be satisfying. What you'll really want to know is, "Why did this evil happen *to me*?" "Why did God *let* this happen to me?"

Sometimes, there's no discernible cause. Sometimes, bad things just happen. Sometimes, terrible tragedies strike out of the blue. You don't have to be guilty of some special sin to suffer: remember, Jesus suffered, and He was completely innocent. As we read in Ecclesiastes:

...Under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Eccl. 9:11-12)

When evil happens to you for no apparent reason whatsoever, then – and especially then – you will want to know why. You may well become fixated on answers that aren't given and can't be found. And as much as you know that it's right to admire Job and Joseph, Anna and Ruth, Paul and others in the Bible who suffered unjustly and still trusted the Lord, you will find that trust does not come easy when the Lord doesn't provide answers.

Because often, instead of the answers we want, the Lord says, "Repent."

He doesn't say "repent" as in an indignant, "How dare you question Me!", nor does He mean, "Shut up because it could be a whole lot worse." He speaks compassionately, bidding you against false beliefs and bad assumptions that cannot save – but instead would leave you to perish forever. This is so very important because when you demand answers that aren't given and can't be found, you create a vacuum that must be filled; and the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh will fill that void with anything *except* Christ. Only Christ saves, and so He bids you to repent, to turn from all those misbeliefs that cannot save you – and to trust in Him who can.

When, for instance, you suffer trouble, one of the first things that you will ask is, "What have I done to deserve this?" Again, sometimes you can see a clear cause and effect, as in, "No one is speaking to me because I've been selfish, caustic and rude." At such times, repentance makes total sense: If you

can point to a specific sin that you have committed as the cause, then it makes perfect sense for you to repent.

If there is no clear cause, be careful of pursuing the question of what you have done to deserve this. The more you do, you will train yourself to believe that you earn God's approval by your good behavior, and that you suffer only when you have committed some sin worse than usual. In that case, you are teaching yourself that you're saved by your works – and that God only loves you when you're well-behaved. You're also denying the doctrine of original sin, and you've turned salvation into a pay-as-you-go operation. If you buy into those teachings, you reject the Gospel that God favors you for the sake of Christ alone. Your false beliefs can't save you, and that is why Jesus bids you to repent.

You're more prone to this than you know. If you've had a relatively enjoyable life, you've probably persuaded yourself that life will be enjoyable as long as you behave. But even if you behave, bad things happen. Illness strikes. People die. And though it happens to everyone, you'll want to know "Why? Why me? Why now?" If you believe that it's your good behavior that maintains God's favor, you've got the cart before the horse and that faith cannot save you. That is why Jesus bids you to repent.

The devil also wants to fill the void with the answer that God is either cruel or doesn't care. You are vulnerable to this if you are given to suffer for a long time, as you are stretched thin, ground to a powder. You are also vulnerable to this when tragedy strikes quickly, where life is turned instantly from enjoyment to desolation. The temptation to turn from the Lord will be strong, because you'll easily believe that He's no help at all if He let this happen, or that He's out to get you and you should run away. When this happens, when you make suffering the reason to reject the Lord, you have made the suffering into a false god – a crummy false god that will not save you. That is why Jesus bids you to repent.

Repent, and turn to what does save.: for when you ask "Why?" and there is only a void, with what would the Lord fill the void? With Himself – with Christ and His grace.

Where you are tempted to doubt God's favor because of the trouble you suffer, God plants the cross before your eyes and says, "My Son has shed His blood to wash away all of your sins. For His sake, how could I not favor you?"

Where you are tempted to believe that your suffering is too big for the Lord to deliver you, He points you to the cross again and says, "I know this trouble is bigger than you, but it is not bigger than My Son, for He bore all sin and all infirmities to the cross to save you. I know that you do not have the strength to endure and conquer, but Christ is risen from the dead. He has conquered all things, and He will be your strength until He delivers you."

Where you are tempted to believe that God is neglectful or cruel, He points you to the cross again and says, "I have already bought you with My Son's blood, so there is no way I will abandon you now. I have saved you from far worse suffering – namely the abandonment to hell; and I will deliver you to far greater joys than you could ever imagine. For Jesus' sake – and His alone, this slight momentary affliction will give way to an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

The Lord is faithful. Does He not use suffering to expose idols and strengthen faith? Are not those Christians who have endured suffering also some of the strongest witnesses of the faith? Suffering does not mean that God has abandoned you or is out to get you. You're redeemed by the blood of Christ. You're baptized – you're a beloved child of God, who will use all things for your good. Whether or not the answer to "why?" can be found, you know what you really need to know: Christ has died and Christ is risen for you. He will deliver you, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen