

Unsuspecting People

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Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 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? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

6 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. 7 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?’

8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

## RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY

Often the Bible can be hard to understand.

Today’s lesson is good example.

Some people came to Jesus and told him about “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”

What is this all about and why did these people tell Jesus about it?

What was their motivation for telling him about this atrocity?

What did they want Jesus to do about it?

The answer is this:

We don’t know for sure what happened.

There is no other record of this incident except this vague reference in the Bible.

We can guess that this was to be some kind of “anti-terrorism” operation that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. Maybe the Romans thought that the Galileans that they killed were Zealots who wanted to overthrow Roman rule.

Regardless, it sounds as if Pilate had these Galileans killed like lambs to the slaughter, and their blood was mixed with the lambs who were being sacrificed for the sins of God’s people.

If this was what happened, this incident was a terrible sacrilege.

And to make matters worse, Pilate got it wrong. According to Jesus these Galileans were innocent. They were “no worse sinners than all other Galileans.”

So how should Jesus respond to this tragedy?

For the past few weeks we have talked about a big temptation that Jesus constantly faced.

It was the temptation of power.

The people wanted a Messiah who would be a warrior, and there were many who wanted to nominate Jesus for the job. They wanted him to be their king, an earthly king who would destroy the enemy by using military might.

This incident in the Temple would provide the perfect opportunity to force Jesus’ hand on this.

“We’ve tried working with the Romans, but look at what they’ve done. They’ve killed some of our fellow Galileans.

All they were doing was offering their sacrifices in the Temple. We need a Messiah who can lead us against this oppression.”

Surely this act of terrorism made Galilean blood boil.

It was clear, at least to the Galileans, that they were the good guys and the Romans were the bad guys.

Self-righteous anger is an intoxicating elixir.

It goes down smooth like sweet wine.  
No doubt they thought that Jesus would at least join them in their anti-Roman rhetoric and maybe even lead a revolt.

### LIFE IS SHORT: REPENT NOW

But, once again Jesus' response is surprising.

Jesus said, "No, those Galileans weren't more sinful than any other Galilean.

They didn't deserve what happened to them.  
In fact they were totally unaware that their end would come so swiftly and tragically."

And then Jesus connects this tragedy with another tragic event that had happened recently in Jerusalem.

He said,

"It's just like those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them.

They weren't any worse sinners than the other folks who lived in Jerusalem. They just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The lesson to be learned from both these tragic events is this:

Life is fragile.  
You never know.  
So, use today wisely.  
Repent while you can."

What does it mean to repent?

Repent means to have a change of heart.  
Repent means to be totally turned around by something.

So what can cause us to have a change of heart?

What can turn us around completely?

Often it is some event that shakes us to our core of our being.

I still remember the looks on the faces of the congregation the week after the terrorist attacks of 911.

It was no ordinary service.

People listened with intensity.

They were looking for answers in light of this great calamity.

I think it was the same long ago people came to Jesus and breathlessly told him a tale of tragedy. The great tragedy of the day left them searching.

I think that's still true.

The tragedy "du jour" offers an opportunity to gain spiritual insight.

## UNSUSPECTING PEOPLE

The question asked by our lesson for today is this: Why do bad things happen to unsuspecting people?

We're still asking that question.

A few weeks ago my wife and I went car shopping and then finished off the night by eating at Cracker Barrel. We were normal people doing normal things. We bought a car and ate some food.

No big deal.

Right?

And then the next weekend I hear that two people were killed at a car dealership, and four more people were killed at a Cracker Barrel in Michigan.

These people weren't worse sinners than anyone else. They were just going about their everyday ordinary lives.

In fact they were doing exactly what I was doing just the week before. But, they were at the wrong place the wrong time.

Such tragedies cause us to just shake our heads.

What would Jesus say about this?  
 Maybe he would say,

“Life is fragile.  
 There is evil in the world, and sometimes people don’t get what they deserve.  
 Therefore, don’t take life for granted.

Live this day fully.  
 Rejoice in the blessings that you have, and out of gratitude serve the Lord.

Forgive those that you need to forgive.  
 Have compassion on those that are in need.

Do justice.  
 Love mercy.  
 And walk humbly with your God.

The time is now.  
 You might not get another chance.  
 Repent.”

Now this is not our natural reaction to tragedy.

In response to violence against our fellow countrymen our first reaction is often to strike back. “We’ll show Pilate that he can’t mess with us.”

But, of course if they had done that, the tragedy would have only been compounded.  
 And retaliation often compounds tragedy in our day as well.

In response to a random tragedy our first response is to ask why.  
 Why did that bridge have to fall?  
 We might place blame on the engineers or the lack of maintenance or even God.

But, what good does that do? None.  
 Certainly we have to do all we can to prevent those things from happening, but the tragedies of life should also remind us about the urgency of this moment.

## THE SOBERING MESSAGE OF LENT

That's why we have the season of Lent.

As we journey with Jesus on the road to the cross it causes us to humbly reflect upon the brevity of life.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday when an ashen sign of the cross is smeared on the heads of worshipers. This is a sign of our mortality ... ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

And then each week leading up to Holy Week the theme continues.

Each week we soberly reflect on the cost of discipleship.

There is an urgency to the kingdom of God.

After all, we are on the road to the cross with Jesus.

Before the ministry of Jesus began, John the Baptist spoke about preparing for the coming of the Messiah in this way, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:9)

For John the coming of the Messiah would be a time of cataclysmic change.

Now was the time to repent and get ready.

Tomorrow might be too late.

And Jesus, sounding ever so much like John the Baptist reminds the crowds and the disciples that the time is short.

How might we change if we truly took that message seriously?

What fruit would we bear that would show that we are serious about repentance?

## THE FRUIT OF JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

In the Old Testament the fruits of repentance were justice and righteousness.

That is, in response to God's deliverance, the people of God were called upon to care for the least of society. This meant the poor, the orphaned, the widow, and the especially the immigrants who came to the Promised Land.

This is a very important point that is often lost on us. Since God's people had once been strangers in the land of Egypt, they were to be sympathetic to the plight of those who were now strangers in the Promised Land.

If the people of God did not respond to God's grace by living a gracious life, then they would be subject to the judgment of God. Sadly God's people were often stubborn and unwilling to change. And the result was judgment.

## THE VINEYARD

The prophet Isaiah used an image that is very similar to the image used in our lesson for today. Isaiah compared God's people to a vineyard.

The owner of the vineyard did everything to make sure that the vineyard was a productive place. He surrounded the vineyard with hedges to protect it. He built a watchtower in the vineyard to guard it. He removed the stones and carefully cultivated the land.

But, what happened when it came time to gather the grapes?

The grapes were sour. Despite the landowner's careful planning and cultivation, the vineyard was useless.

So what do you do with a useless vineyard?  
You tear it down and start over.

Isaiah said that this is what God was going to do with God's people. They were a useless vineyard.

Why?

God expected the sweet fruit of justice from His people but he got bloodshed instead. God expected righteousness from His people, but instead He heard the mournful cry of the oppressed. (Isaiah 5.1-7)

So the Babylonian Captivity came about as punishment for their unfaithful ways.

## THE BARREN FIG TREE

Jesus believed that judgment was once again on the horizon. So He used a metaphor that hearkened back to words of the prophets.

He told a parable about a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard. After three years the man came to pick some figs, but the tree was barren ... no fruit.

What good is a fig tree that doesn't bear fruit?  
For the owner of the vineyard the tree was no good.  
It didn't bear fruit. It wasn't serving any purpose.

So he told the gardener who tended the vineyard for him, "Chop it down. It's a waste of good soil."

But, this is where the parable of Jesus differs a bit from Isaiah's parable.

In Jesus' parable the barren fig tree is given another chance. The gardener says, "Let's give the tree another year. I'll dig around it and put manure on it. Maybe next year the tree will produce fruit."

## A SECOND CHANCE

The tree is given a second chance.

This is Jesus' message to those who are worried by the tragedies of life. "You have a second chance.

You aren't promised tomorrow.  
Life is short and fragile so nurture those things in your life that will bring growth and fruit.  
Use this opportunity to repent and go in a different direction."

But, notice that judgment will come.

If the fig tree does not product fruit, there will come a time when it will be cut down.

The grace of God saves us from our sin.

But, the grace of God does not allow us to wallow in our sin.

Fruit is still expected in the kingdom of God; it is the fruit of compassion and forgiveness.

God has given us a second chance.

We are the fig tree that will be nurtured by the faithful gardener in the coming year.

And this fact should guide our approach to others.

#### JUDGMENT: A WORD OF WARNING

Stories that emphasize judgment and repentance are not so popular these days.

In fact many people assume that Christianity is all about forgiveness and grace and nothing more.

Their theology can be summarized by something I've mentioned these past few Sundays. The heretic said on his death bed, "God will forgive me. He's in the forgiving business."

If any preacher dares to warn of impending judgment that preacher is labeled by people inside and outside the church as judgmental and not truly Christian.

But, forgiveness and grace assume a need for repentance.

Forgiveness and grace imply that there is also justice and judgment.

As Bonhoeffer pointed out in his classic work, "The Cost of Discipleship" grace is not cheap. Grace is costly, so costly that it even cost our Lord his life.

The coming of the kingdom is serious business.

God judges our evil ways out of love.

And out of love God gives us a chance to repent.

Many in the church today are hesitant to talk about sin and judgment for fear of offending a generation that has embraced cheap grace with a vengeance.

But, Jesus was not afraid to talk about sin and judgment.

He loved his people too much to allow them to go down the road to destruction. He wanted to warn them and call them to repentance.

If we had a son or daughter who was on the wrong road, would we allow them to continue on that destructive path or would we confront them?

We would confront them.

We would even risk losing our relationship with them rather than letting them destroy themselves. God's love in Jesus Christ is like that. God in Christ still calls on his people to reflect upon the brevity of life and the dangers ahead. God in Christ still calls on his people to repent and go in a different direction.

## HELPING US BEAR FRUIT

We can't control what others do.

The world is still filled with crazy people who kill others for no apparent reason.

The world is still filled with despots who slaughter the innocent. The world is still filled with random accidents and tragedies that make no sense.

But, we also know that sin is not limited to the crazies of the world. Sin resides in us as well.

The Bible tells us that all have sinned, and that includes us.

But, God in Christ has given us a different way to deal with sin.

We can bear the fruit of repentance.

We can demonstrate to the world the power of God's forgiveness in the way that we treat each other.

And God is willing to help us in this endeavor.

Notice that in the parable the fig tree is not only given another year to produce figs.

The fig tree is also given help by the gardener.

The gardener will give special attention to the needs of the tree, digging around the tree to loosen roots that might be bound and enriching the soil with manure.

The patience and nurture of God stands in stark contrast to how we do business.

We are liable to say, "You've had your chance. Now you have to face the consequences."

But, thank God, God is not like that.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of a second chance, and heaven knows we need one.

This work of bearing the fruits of repentance is never done.

Throughout our lives we struggle with this.

But, we also know that the Good Gardener patiently tills the soil of our life and enables us to become more than we are today.

And so each year in the season of Lent the church gives us an opportunity to seek restoration and renewal through the discipline of confession and heartfelt repentance.

The Gardener still asks with a sense of hope and expectation,

"Could this be the year for figs?"

Let us pray.

"Merciful God help us confess our sins and bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Give us the courage to admit what we have done wrong and what we have failed to do right.

In this coming year dig around our hearts and open us to the power of your transforming grace in Jesus Christ.

In His name we ask it. Amen.”