

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022
“Troubling Towers and Trees”
A Sermon Based on Luke 13:1-9
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IMAGE CREDIT: <https://vridar.org/2018/01/17/luke-makes-jesus-more-patient-with-the-fig-tree/>

Luke 13:1-9 (NRSV) ~ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

This third Sunday in Lent, we continue walking with Jesus down the road to Jerusalem. A group of Galileans journeys with him and they begin discussing a recent event that has them shaken. Apparently, some fellow Galileans, who had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the Temple, had been unjustly killed by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who even went so far as to cause further outrage by mingling their blood in with the blood of the sacrificial animals, an abhorrent act within their system of purity laws. In discussing this, they seem to have raised with Jesus the perennial age-old question we always default into when something tragic happens: why do bad things happen to some people. Why these Galileans rather than other Galileans who also were at the Temple that day? Is it because they were evil? Had sinned? Jesus doesn't get into some elaborate argument about evil, known as the problem of theodicy. He doesn't want to dwell there. Rather, his response is immediate, surprising, and challenges all of us. Reframing their question he says: ***“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”*** (Lk 13:2-3)

Thanks Jesus for this confusing response! So they didn't die because they had sinned but now you are telling us that this situation somehow relates to us and we need to repent? What did we do? Then Jesus brings up a tower that fell down and killed 18 innocent people who were standing nearby. The question being asked is whether they somehow deserved it because they had sinned. He turns to those walking with him and asks them to remember ***“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?”*** Do you think they got what they deserved?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “tower”? When I was younger the question used to be asked: “Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?” And I could answer that I was in my first grade class room at Arlington Elementary School outside Boston, when the teacher suddenly was called out of the room and came back in crying and told us that our President had been shot and killed in Dallas. The question of my daughter's generation is different. It is: Where were you when the twin towers fell? The question of this generation's children in this particular region might be different. Where were you the night of December 10-11, 2021, when tornados hit our area? Rephrased, so Jesus, what about ***“all those people who were killed or who lost their homes and businesses when the tornados hit down in Mayfield—do you think they were any worse offenders than all the others living over in Murray who were spared?”***

Answer us Jesus! Answer us then and answer us today? Tell us Jesus: Is it our fault when bad things happen to us? Are we being punished for our sins? Even those of us who don't see much of a relationship between sin and suffering still ask, even after something even relatively minor goes wrong, "What did I do to deserve this?" "Why me?" And we ask this question in a much more emotional, urgent way when something major happens: when someone is diagnosed with a terminal illness or dies tragically and those who are left behind ask whether the illness or death was some form of punishment from God. Is it karma? The converse is that when something bad happens to others but not to us, do we think that we have somehow been shown divine favor. For example, I heard countless people say after the recent tornado that God had spared them. Does that mean that God somehow caused the tornado to hit down on the candle factory in Mayfield rather than the window factory in Murray? Or on FCC in Mayfield but not on FCC in Murray? Do you see what twisted sick thinking this is?

In our painful struggle to make sense of something senseless, we fall back on the age-old logic that if there is a demonstrable effect there must be an explainable cause. If you really want to get into it this line of thinking, read the book of Job in the Bible which grapples with this question. Job's friends simply cannot believe that he is innocent since he has had everything taken from him: home, land, family. There must be some sin that he committed, they insisted. We have to remember that they are asking this question within the context of their Jewish faith, which is chock full of the belief that there is a relationship between human sin and suffering. We find this especially in the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses calls the Israelites to decision by announcing the blessings which accompany obedience and the curses that fall upon disobedience in Deuteronomy 28: 15-69: *¹⁵ But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:*

¹⁶ Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field.

¹⁹ Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

²⁰ The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me. ... ²⁵ The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies ... ²⁷ The LORD will afflict you with the boils ... ulcers, scurvy, and itch ... madness, blindness, and confusion of mind; ... ³⁹ You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm

shall eat them. ⁴⁰ You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. ... ⁴⁷ Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything, ... ⁴⁹ The LORD will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle ... ⁵⁰ a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favor to the young. ⁵² It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout your land; it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout the land that the LORD your God has given you.

And that's just a portion of it. That's the theology that people in Jesus' time were accustomed to. And Jesus wholeheartedly rejects this theology and view of a vengeful God. Do you think that the Galileans whom Pilate killed or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them were worse than the other offenders? Jesus answers no.

It is interesting that there is another story that took place at the pool of Siloam, likely right near the tower that collapsed, where this same question is asked. In John's Gospel Jesus *"as he walked along ... [he] saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned ..."* (Jn 9:2-3) In other words, bad things happen to innocent people. Lynn Japinga says that: "Suffering is a part of the fallen world. The winds form hurricanes and tornados, not because God wills them to, or because they are inherently malevolent, but because that is what winds do. ... People die of cancer, not because they are evil, but because they are mortal, and the human body is imperfect. Human sinfulness can be a factor in many tragedies, though it is more often the sin of the perpetrators than the victims. Children are killed while attending school because of mental illness and long-repressed anger and the availability of weapons (and a host of other factors) can combine to form a lethal rampage. Pilate kills the Galileans because he is trying to show his power. Perhaps the tower of Siloam fell because of shoddy construction or inferior materials. Some tragedies are random. Others could be prevented. Perhaps this is why Jesus calls for repentance. We contribute to the brokenness and pain of the world and deserve judgment."¹

¹ Lynn Japinga, "Theological Perspective on Luke 13:1-9 in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 2*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: WJK, 2014), p. 30.

And that's precisely the key to understanding why, after Jesus tells his listeners that even though the Galileans who died at Pilate's hands and those who died when the tower collapsed are not more sinful than others, he twice says these astonishing words: *"unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."*

How can Jesus out of one side of his mouth break the connection between sin and suffering, and out of the other side tell us that we are somehow responsible and need to repent? The key lies in both seeing what the two tragedies discussed symbolize and then looking at the parable of the fig tree as we come to understand that we all contribute to the brokenness and pain of the world and deserve judgment.

The innocent death of the Galileans under the hand of Pilate is an example of the militaristic misuse of power. It is a straight out act of government oppression and imperial violence that has happened all through history and is unfolding right before our very eyes now with Russia's invasion of and war against the Ukrainians. Even though sin doesn't lead to suffering, we all need to repent or we will perish just as they did. No, this is not a contradiction, for we all contribute in some ways to misuses of power. Hitler, after all, didn't carry out the invasion of Poland all by himself, nor did he single handedly perpetrate the Holocaust. Many people were behind these efforts either actively or by silently standing by. Putin, although he will bear the primary responsibility, was not able to invade the Ukraine without the help of the oligarchs and upper level military officials. We all in some small part bear responsibility for wars that are carried out in the world either through our words, deeds, or our lethal silence.

The innocent death of those 18 upon whom the tower of Siloam fell might have been caused by the "shoddy construction or inferior materials" used to cut corners and save money, similar to the recent collapse of an apartment building in south Florida that had violated building code. We all are responsible in some way when we purchase, for example, inexpensive clothing from places around the world where, because of building code violations, there are factory collapses or fires and inadequate pay and working conditions for people. This tower of Siloam incident also is symbolic of natural disasters such as droughts, hurricanes, tornados. We might think about the fact that the majority of scientists are shouting out to us to "Repent!" "Change your ways!" They believe these natural disasters are partly the fault of human caused climate change, for which we all bear some responsibility through our comfortable lifestyles.

When Jesus tells us that we need to repent or we too shall perish, basically he is telling us that each one of us has a role to play in keeping each other and our planet safe. And the parable of the barren fig tree points to this. But how in the world does a fig tree not bearing fruit connect with Pilate's murder of the Galileans and the collapse of the tower of Siloam? Actually plenty. Jesus' listeners would have immediately understood that the fig tree was a symbol for Israel. By extension, the fig tree is a symbol of our world. Our world is not doing well. It is not bearing the fruit it should. Instead of leading to a life-giving harvest full of acts of kindness and generosity where people's basic needs are taken care of and treated justly, it is barren.

Our planet is in bad shape. There are wars driven by power as symbolized by the Galileans murdered by Pilate. There are natural disasters created by human greed as symbolized by the tower of Siloam collapsing and killing 18 people. In relation to this universal condition, Jesus calls upon us to repent. Simply stated, repent is an action word, calling us to change our ways. To do the kinds of things necessary to build a better world that is a reflection of God's Kingdom on earth.

We are given two choices that are represented by the two characters in this parable. One choice is to be like the landowner who only rarely visits the fig tree. When he does he is aloof and has given over his responsibility to others. I don't care about this fig tree! Tear it down! The other choice is to be like the gardener, who makes a plea to give the fig tree, the world, a second chance. But the gardener is not expecting this to happen by magic, or an intervention of God, or the work of others. The gardener is willing to get out there and get dirty. Spread manure by the tree. Aerate the soil. Not only say in word that he wants to give the fig tree a second chance but do the hard work in helping it bear fruit!

Which character are you in this parable? Are you like the aloof landowner? Or, like the gardener, are you willing to repent, change your ways and get out there, get down, and get dirty for God as we help build God's Kingdom on Earth, understanding the seriousness with which Jesus says to all of us regarding the dire situation our world finds itself in right now that "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Let us pray ...