

## ***Turn and Live!***

Luke 13:1-9

Lent 3; Series C

On August 28, 2005 Hurricane Katrina reached its peak strength. After the turmoil that it caused Hurricane Katrina was named as the costliest natural disaster and one of the top five deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States. Many who have speculated why this hurricane was so costly and deadly have pinpointed the poor engineering of the levees that failed and allowed the flood waters to pour into New Orleans and surrounding areas. Others speculate that God allowed this hurricane to wreak havoc on the city of New Orleans as a punishment for particular immoral, sinful behavior and actions notorious to the area. This is the speculation to which our Gospel reading this morning has something to say.

We can put this speculation in the form of a question: “Does tragedy and suffering happen to particular people and not others *because* those people are more worthy of God’s wrath and judgment?” I chose Hurricane Katrina this morning simply because of the widespread correlation that many made between the severity of the natural disaster and the location in which it took place. However, we all know that we could ask the same question of any number of situations. Were the people in Lower Manhattan, New York City greater sinners than the rest that 9/11 occurred there? Were the people of Haiti greater sinners to deserve a magnitude 7.0 earthquake in January of 2010? Were the people of Japan more disobedient to God than others to deserve the earthquake and tsunami in March of 2011? What about the people in the Midwest who experience floods and tornadoes annually? What about the East Coast that was rocked by storms in recent months? We can consider the sinking of ships, the crashing of airplanes, or shootings at schools. Most recently, we might think of the man near Tampa, Florida who fell through a sink hole that opened up in his bedroom and died. Do bad things happen to particular people and in particular places because those people are more deserving of it for one reason or another? Is this why bad things or suffering happens?

Apparently, at least some people in Biblical times held the belief that suffering and tragedy happens to certain people because they are deserving of it. Eliphaz, one of the three friends of Job, speaks to Job while he is mourning. God allowed Satan to take away Job’s family, wealth, and health. While Job sits in ashes and scrapes the boils with a piece of pottery, Eliphaz says to Job, “Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off” (Job 4:7)?

In our Gospel reading some were present who had a similar assumption about the correlation between suffering and the severity of one’s sin. These people come to Jesus and tell him about the latest, tragic current event. Certain men from Galilee who were offering sacrifices in the Temple, were apparently also suspected of starting an insurrection against the Roman government. While these men were offering sacrifices Roman soldiers sent by the Roman governor of the region, Pontius Pilate, killed the men at the altar. So Jesus asks, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way” (Luke 13:2)?

Jesus reaches into the file of Judean current events and pulls out another tragic event to use as an example. He refers to an incident that took place at a famous pool in the community of Siloam, located outside the city walls of Jerusalem. 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” (Luke 13:4)?

The Holy Scriptures have value for us today not only because they are inspired by our Holy God and truly are the Word of God, but also because they wrestle with the same kinds of questions we wrestle with today, as we just witnessed from the previous examples. So we can use the Word of God to serve as the exclusive authority to guide us in what we believe, teach, and practice as the people of God. By using clearer parts of Scripture to interpret less clear parts of Scripture, and by considering the historical and social context in which writings occurred, we can arrive at true answers to difficult questions.

When Jesus is confronted with a question similar to the one that we are attempting to address this morning, he clearly says, “No.” Bad things do not happen to particular people and in particular places because those people are more deserving of it for one reason or another. Yet, that still leaves us with this question, “Why not?”

When we reflect on Jesus’ response to his conversation partners in the Gospel lesson, we can conclude that suffering, tragedy, and other difficulties that we face in this world occur as consequences of Sin. When we use the Holy Scriptures as our exclusive authority we must conclude that all suffering is a result of Sin and humanity’s disobedience and unfaithfulness to its Creator’s Word and Will. If we define Sin as “doing it our way rather than God’s Way,” then the pain, suffering, and tragedies that occur in creation and to our fellow creatures are the consequences. Death itself and the separation it brings from God and others is the ultimate consequence of Sin against God, as the Holy Scriptures testify to it. We may not like this response. We may not be satisfied with it. But this is the answer that the true Word of God gives to us.

Part of the reason that we may not like this answer to why bad things happen to certain people and in certain places and not others, is because it means that we have a problem within ourselves that needs to be addressed. And this also is true. We are not born with faith in God. We are not born in a right relationship with God. This is the consequence of Sin present in our lives. And if this problem continues in our lives untreated it leads not only to one death but two deaths. The ultimate consequence of Sin in this world is not just physical or temporal death and separation but it is also eternal death and separation from God and one another. As we continue to sort through the “why?” question that is prompted by human suffering and see that human Sin and disobedience to God is the problem and that eternal death and separation from God is the ultimate consequence of Sin, then we soon arrive at this disturbing, but important question, “How many times would we like to die?” This is precisely the question Jesus is driving at when he says in the Gospel reading, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). For those who desire to live eternally, then our solution is the same solution that Jesus gave to his audience—repentance.

The solution of “repentance” brings us full circle to the season of Lent. In Lent we make a pilgrimage to the cross and the empty tomb, just as sure as Jesus himself made that pilgrimage. One of the key themes of the season of Lent is “repentance.” It means to turn completely around or to change one’s mind. In the season of Lent, we focus on our problem—our continual problem—of “doing it our way rather than God’s Way.” We focus on the problem of Sin that lies even within ourselves. We reflect all over again, like we are doing today, on the consequences of Sin in this world. And

the whole process is designed to bring us to “turn completely around” and “change our mind.” The whole purpose is repentance so that we might trust in God all the more and trust in his ultimate solution to the problem of Sin in this world and in our lives—the death and resurrection of Christ.

Sin must be addressed. It must be put to death. God, the Father put Sin to death ultimately through Christ and his sacrifice. For those who are baptized into Christ and trust in Christ and his payment for our Sin and victory over death, the ultimate consequence of Sin, then these enemies have no dominion over us. We will live—and not die—eternally. We will not be separated eternally from God even as we live in this world where we still experience the effects of Sin and “doing things our way rather than God’s way.”

This is the Biblical answer regarding the question of why bad things happen to certain people and in certain places and not others. Sin is why bad things happen. The consequences of Sin are suffering, tragedy, difficulties in this life, and ultimately death itself. Praise be to God in Christ that he has made a way for us to truly live. Amen.