

## Worse Sinners

Luke 13:1-9

The news is full of disasters and tragedies. The Russian invasion of Ukraine entered a darker phase as Russian forces attacked a maternity hospital and a theater that was serving as a bomb shelter that had “children” written in Russian outside of it. Closer to home, the shooting outside of East High School in Des Moines continues to make news, residents continue to clean up after the tornado that went through Winterset, and each day seemingly brings another deadly auto accident.

When confronted with tragedy, with disaster, with suffering, our first instinct is often to figure out why. If we can figure out why disaster happens, it seemingly gives us some control over the situation, over our lives. If we can figure out why, maybe we can prevent it the next time.

Whenever disaster strikes, it’s easy to find voices that tell us why. After the 2014 earthquake in Haiti, Pat Robertson famously blamed it on a supposed pact with the devil the Haitians made as they declared their independence. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, some blamed the debauchery of New Orleans for the disaster. In our current disasters, we can point to Putin’s pride and greed as the reason for the suffering in Ukraine. We can blame gun access and the lack of family support and good role models for teenagers for the shooting.

Of course those answers are often simplistic. The blame for Katrina’s destruction comes from building below sea level, failure to maintain levees, and environmental destruction that removed barrier islands and wetlands that used to act as a buffer to keep storms from reaching the city. Haiti has had problems for decades, not caused by a pact with the devil.

It all goes back to our presupposition, conscious or not, that good things should happen to good people and bad things should happen to bad people. When bad things happen to good people, we’re left with questions. We’re left with why. We start to compare, to wonder if they were not as good as we thought they were. We wonder if they’re worse sinners than we are, and that’s why suffering came.

Today’s Gospel lesson shows us how Jesus answers that question. Jesus is asked about a tragedy that had happened recently in Jerusalem. A group of Galileans had apparently been attacked in the temple by Roman soldiers. Jesus then brings up another tragedy; a construction accident killed 18 people. Between the two examples, Jesus covers the spectrum of tragedies. One group of people are Galileans, like Jesus and his disciples, a more rural province known for being a source of political unrest. The other group seems to be those from Jerusalem, used to living in the big city. One tragedy is the result of government oppression, the other the result of a “natural” disaster, or at least a disaster without a specific cause or blame.

One of the natural reactions to tragedies is to find someone to blame, some reason that it happened. After all, we do the same things in our own lives. When something goes wrong in our lives—when we suffer from chronic pain, terminal illness, the loss of a child, unemployment, or ruined relationships, we look for a reason. Sometimes we’re willing to admit our own part in the situation, our own guilt. Other times, though, it can be easy for us to assume God is out to get us. “What did I do to deserve this?” “Is God punishing me?” As fallen, sinful human beings, we tend only to see suffering through the lens of cause and effect.

While, in fact, sometimes suffering is punishment for sin, as we see throughout the Bible when people turn away from God, we can't assume that's always the reason. Sometimes, it's the sin of someone else, as we pay the price for their pride or greed. Sometimes, suffering happens just because of the brokenness sin caused in creation, as God's perfect world doesn't work the way it should.

The response of Jesus to these tragedies, though, isn't to find blame or point fingers. He never explains the why. He points out that the victims hadn't done anything unusual to deserve their fates. But Jesus doesn't stop there. Instead, he uses the tragedies to point out a universal truth – that none of us know when we will die. So much of life is outside of our own control; we can't predict when tragedy will strike us. Instead, we're reminded that we should be ready for when tragedy comes near to us. We do that by repenting, by turning back to God.

Jesus doesn't answer the question of the “why” of suffering. Instead, he gives a message in response to suffering. The message is that we should turn our attention to our own lives and stop speculating about others. Don't judge their worthiness – look at your own life. Life is short. Stuff happens. Be ready. Do those things that you should be doing. Pay attention.

C.S. Lewis in his book *The Problem of Pain* writes “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Pain and suffering come into the world not to show who the worst sinner is. It doesn't come because God is capricious. It comes to call us to repentance. When we do repent, though, God forgives us.

Jesus didn't answer the why questions he was asked about suffering. Instead, he went and did something about it. He headed to Jerusalem,

where he would be arrested and beaten by soldiers under the control of the same Pilate who had mingled the blood of other Galileans with their sacrifices. Jesus would suffer and die on the cross so we wouldn't be forced to bear the suffering our sins deserve. The only man who never sinned took the place of all of us who are worse sinners than He was.

In Jesus, God has redeemed suffering. Jesus is God in the flesh, God on the cross, God suffering for you and me in our place. Now suffering serves as a call to repentance, a call to receive God's love and mercy, and a call to draw closer into the life of God. As Paul writes, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts...” (Romans 5:3-5).

We may never know why tragedies happen. We shouldn't, however, speculate. Philip Yancey, in his book *Where is God When It Hurts?*, writes that “Suffering offers a general message of warning to all humanity that something is wrong with this planet, and that we need radical outside intervention. But you cannot argue backward and link someone's specific pain to a direct act of God.”

So the next time that you are suffering, don't assume God is out to get you. The next time you see disaster, devastation, and disease, don't judge those who are caught up in it, who are forced to endure it. They are not worse sinners than anyone else—and neither are you. Instead, we are all children of God, and Jesus calls his children to repentance because he loves us and doesn't want us to perish. During this season of Lent, may we all answer that call to repent of our sins and be forgiven in Jesus' name.

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