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“Why?”

Luke 13:1-9

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

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

Too often, I find myself wrestling with Rabbi Kushner’s question “Why do bad things happen to good people?”¹ Most recently, that struggle was set off after hearing the news about the flooding in central Texas. Last I heard, the death toll from the July 4th weekend floods had climbed

¹ Kushner, Harold C., When Bad Things Happen to Good People, (New York: HarperCollins, 1981).



to 135, including children. Perhaps this news hit me especially hard because I grew up in Dallas. Even though I am now proud to claim Virginia as home, Texas is where I come from.

Although my parents and I left Texas long ago, I still have family in Texas including my brother, Bob, who has lived in San Antonio most of his adult life and a cousin who lives in what is known as the Hill Country. I vividly remember a special family reunion one Thanksgiving in Texas, approximately 30 years ago, with my whole family on my dad's side: three generations of children, cousins, aunts and uncles. I have fond memories of family volleyball games, children Ziplining for the first time, and skits my cousin directed, enlisting our children to act out family stories. That family reunion was held at Mo Ranch—a Presbyterian camp and conference center in Kerr County, Texas—at the headwater of the Guadalupe River in Hunt, Texas, in the Hill Country. Mo Ranch was one of the camps affected by the recent flooding. Despite receiving no warnings from officials that rising water was coming, in the middle of the night, camp staff safely evacuated 70 children and adults to higher ground.

But, just seven miles away, their “sister camp,” Camp Mystic, a well-known and popular Christian camp for girls, was not so fortunate. They were caught by surprise with deadly consequences when the river surged. The camp, set to celebrate its centennial next year, has suffered significant damage. The camp owner and 27 campers and counselors, mostly young girls staying in cabins along the riverbank, died in the flood waters. Why did this happen, especially to innocent children? Again, I ask “Why, God?”

Many of us struggle with that question, “Why, God?” Why did the baby die, why did the cancer return, why did those innocent people die in the fire, why was that maternity hospital bombed, why are those people starving? We face untimely deaths of loved ones, accidents with horrible consequences, natural disasters, and ongoing wars and ask “why?” These are tough questions to answer.

As my friend, Shannon Kirshner, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, observed in a sermon on this topic, “Underneath those questions are the larger issues: “Why did you let this happen to me, God? What did we do to deserve this? Haven't we been faithful enough? Even those of us who claim that suffering is not tied to faithfulness sometimes react like this when trouble starts.”²

Why does an all-powerful, loving God allow such bad things to happen to good people? Our question is as old as the human race, finding Biblical expression in Job, the Psalms, and even the

² Kirshner, Shannon, “*Now What?*” Sermon@Fourth Presbyterian Chicago, March 20, 2022.



gospel. Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Savior, was crucified on a cross should have ended the speculation that those who suffer are the worst sinners once and for all, but it has not.

Apparently, our concerns are not that different from those of Jesus's audience described in today's scripture. They had similar questions to ours: Did you hear that Pontius Pilate brutally killed the Galileans while they were worshipping and offering sacrifices in the temple?" And the tower near the pool at Siloam, close to the center of Jerusalem, collapsed and crushed 18 people? Jesus knew that his listeners were upset and assumed these Galileans and Jerusalemites must have done bad things for these horrible events to cause their deaths.

Yet, Jesus saw this as a "teachable moment." He did not answer their "why" questions or try to make sense of this terrible news. Instead, he redirected his listeners' focus from reasons for the suffering of others to their own personal transformation. As noted by Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, although the details of these two events have been lost to time, "Jesus seizes on two calamities that may have been subjects of recent conversation around the local watering hole—one an instance of state-sanctioned terror" and the other, "a random accident."³ In both events, people were killed for no apparent reason. "Jesus does not explain the causes of violence that nature and human beings regularly inflict on unsuspecting people. He does not blame the victims. He does not defend the creation or the Creator when "why" questions seem warranted."⁴ Rather, he asks "What about you? How will you live your life?"

Jesus turns everything upside down in this passage. After assuring his listeners that we should not equate nature and human-made tragedies with divine punishment, Jesus turns his attention "away from disasters, victims and "why?" questions—to talk about repentance."⁵ In response to his rhetorical questions about whether people were killed because they had sinned, Jesus repeated the same words, "no, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."⁶ Those who think they are in a superior moral position, wondering about others who must have done something wrong, are caught by surprise when Jesus tells them to repent.

As Rev. Kirshner says, "I don't know about you, but I am not sure I understand Jesus's logic here. If suffering is not God's judgment of our faithfulness or unfaithfulness, then why does Jesus tell us to repent or perish? Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Could Jesus be throwing our need for logical explanations up into the air to remind us that we can neither control nor explain everything that happens in our lives?"⁷

³ Skinner, Matt, *Commentary on Luke 13:1-9, Working Preacher*, March 7, 2010.

⁴Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Luke 13:3,5

⁷ Kirshner.



As much as I don't like it, and maybe you don't either, we cannot control or explain everything that happens in life. I don't know why the Guadalupe River flooded, and all those people died. I don't know why so many people lost homes or loved ones in the Los Angeles fires. I don't know why so many innocent people have been killed in Ukraine or Gaza. We simply cannot explain, control, or protect ourselves from everything. Like it or not, God created us with free will and the possibility of suffering is part of what it means to live in God's creation.

But that does not mean God does not care about us. Not the God who "so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."⁸ There is no tragedy that will separate us from the love of God and his son, who died on the cross, rose from the dead and conquered death. Fred Craddock notes that when Jesus's listeners come to him asking whether "violence and suffering are random or according to divine law," Jesus "rejects their attempts at calculation because they deflect from the primary issues: the obligation of every person to live in penitence and trust before God."⁹ Jesus challenges us to examine our hearts and turn away from sin; to reorient our minds and hearts to God. Repent and live as forgiven people.

Perhaps Jesus hoped that if we could let go of our desire for logical explanations, and trust that God is present with us even in the depths of suffering and tragedy, we might ask a different question. What if instead of asking "why did this happen?" we ask, "How then will I live and help others to live in a world where this kind of human-made or nature-made suffering happens?"¹⁰ Maybe our question should be "How do I live?" instead of "Why did they die?"

The issue here is not whether guilty sinners perish or innocent people survive. Rather, Jesus calls us away from judging others' suffering—and tells us to repent of our own sins, to turn and to examine our own lives. The question is not "Why did this happen and why did they suffer?" but "How do I need to change and contribute to God's kingdom?" As Barbara Brown Taylor explains, "Forgiveness is a starting place, not a stopping place—God's grace is not simply the infinite supply of divine forgiveness upon which hopeless sinners depend," but it is the "mysterious strength that God lends human beings who commit themselves to the work of transformation—to follow Christ into the startling freedom of new life."¹¹ We should turn to God who loves us and follow Jesus into a new way of living.

After calling us to repent, Jesus tells a short parable about an ordinary fig tree. The frustrated owner of the vineyard is ready to give up and cut down the fig tree because it has not born fruit for

⁸ John 3:16

⁹ Craddock, Fred B., *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pp.168-169.

¹⁰ Kirschner

¹¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Speaking of Sin*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000), pp. 85-86,90.



three years. A gardener tries to persuade the owner to let him tend the tree one more year with the hope that figs will finally grow.

Will we live like the landowner or the gardener? Will we just give up when things get hard or will we try harder to bear fruit? In this parable, Skinner suggests that “the gardener offers a crucial characterization of patience and mercy.”¹² Much can still be done to help the tree grow and bear fruit. Correspondingly, God does not abandon us but is patient and merciful with us. Just as the purpose of the fig tree is to bear fruit, we, too, are called “to bear fruit,” to turn away from sin and advance God’s kingdom on earth.

Skinner asserts “the parable’s power comes through the suspense it generates. Will fruit emerge in time to thwart the ax? How will this season of second chances play out? Because the *need* for repentance is assumed, the emphasis in this passage is on the *urgency* of the call to repent .”¹³ Attending to one’s relation to God is urgent, yet God is patient with the fig tree that may not bear fruit. And God is patient and merciful with us. As Ann Childs observed in Parables to the Point, “the last chance in the Christian life, as it was for the fig tree, comes from special care. God cares for us through the presence of his son. . . . The sustaining power of God creates newness in us (man), a change that takes place that enables the responsive person (man) to redirect one’s (his) life and come alive under God’s care .”¹⁴ And we, too, can come alive anew through God’s grace and mercy.

As much as we want there to be a reason for human suffering, Jesus teaches that such tragedies should nudge us to turn to God. Turn away from fear and the need for certainty. God cares for us and extends the gift of grace, giving us the opportunity “to come alive anew” and to extend grace to one another.

With the recent floods in Texas and the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East fresh on our minds, Jesus urges us to ask ourselves “How do I need to change? How is God calling me to live the life I have?” Jesus calls us to turn toward God, to be strengthened by God’s presence and to realize that God transforms us through his grace. And we, in turn, can “bear fruit” and respond to God’s grace by loving others, by being present when they are hurting, by being generous in times of need, by being kind. The question for us is not “Why did these bad things happen to good people?” but “How are you calling me, God, to live differently?” Rather than blaming God or asking God to explain the suffering of others, we can ask God how we can help others bear their pain and to help us walk with those who are hurting.

¹² Skinner.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Childs, Ann Taylor, Parables to the Point, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p.77.



Another tragedy resulting in killing of innocent people unfolding before our eyes is the Ukraine war, now entering its fourth year. I am inspired by those who have found ways to “bear fruit” in the most difficult of circumstances. *Our Sunday Visitor* interviewed Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, patriarchal head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church during his visit to the United States last February. In the interview, the Major Archbishop identifies three ways in which the church is assisting the suffering people of Ukraine. The first is to be present with them. Second, 30% of Ukrainians need food, shelter and medicine. Third, millions of Ukrainians are asking “Why is this happening to us?” which prompts the church to respond with the proclamation of the Good News and to show God’s presence among us. In Major Archbishop Shevchuk’s words:

Each day in Ukraine, we look into the eyes of death. Each time I meet people, subconsciously I understand that it could be the very last meeting with that person, because we live in constant danger of death. Do we have hope in such circumstances? My answer is yes because we as Christians believe in the Resurrection. Looking into the eyes of death, we are looking into eternity.

The basic question during war is “Where is God?” And I received an answer from one young Ukrainian soldier who told me: “God is in us. He is present in our everyday offerings. He himself is killed each day in every slain soldier and civilian.”

The cross, the passion of Christ for us in Ukraine, is not a cold statue on the wall, but the living flesh of my people. In that flesh, we experience the presence of God. And because of His presence, we have hope.¹⁵

Rather than questioning God and living in fear, the Ukrainians turn to God and experience God’s presence in their lives, even in battle. Tragedy has a way of nudging people toward God, prompting us to reorient ourselves. But let’s face it. This is hard to do. It is hard to ask ourselves “How should I live?” rather than “Why did this happen?” Yet Jesus calls us to turn toward God, to be strengthened by his care and presence. Transformed through his grace, “bear fruit,” as God hopes for us, by extending grace to others, by being present when they are hurting, by being generous in times of need, by loving. And maybe by God’s grace, the “why” question will be transformed into a deeper understanding that “God, you are with us even in this.”

¹⁵ Christian, Gina, “Christ in the Midst of War: Finding Hope and Justice in Ukraine’s Struggle,” *Our Sunday Visitor*, February 17, 2025.

