

Third Sunday in Lent; March 20, 2022

+ Luke 13:1-9 +

“Remember to Repent – and to Show it”

At that time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. He answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than the other Galileans because they suffered these things? I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse sinners than all the people living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”

He told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. So he said to the gardener, ‘Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?’ But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.”

People tell Jesus about two tragedies. The first tragedy is the result of human violence. As far as I know, this specific event is not mentioned in any other historical record. We can only know as much as the Holy Spirit tells us here: For whatever reason, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate had ordered the massacre of worshipers in the temple. This first tragedy may remind us of some tragedies we have seen: mass shootings, terrorist attacks, any time human rage and violence snuffs out human life. We are too familiar with these types of tragedies.

The second tragedy may remind us more of other news stories we see, such as a pileup on I-95, or an accidental apartment fire. The tower of Siloam fell on and killed eighteen people. Probably no malicious intent was involved. But it is a tragedy nonetheless, and we are too familiar with this type as well.

Do you notice what happens as soon as the people report these tragic stories to Jesus? He does not even wait for the crowd to ask, “Why?”. Jesus knows that people always want to know the reasons for tragedies. Why didn’t God stop Pilate’s soldiers from slaughtering those worshipers? Why did the tower have to fall during the day and not at night when no one was around? As the Son of God, Jesus knows people always want to know why. So he does not even wait for the question.

Why tragedy? is a question best addressed in a fifteen week Bible study course, not a fifteen minute sermon. But Jesus’ words do supply at least one reason tragedies happen, and one reason they do not.

First, this is not a reason: that the people caught in the tragedy somehow had it coming more than anyone else. Of course we all have death coming to us because we’re all sinful. But I should not suppose that a pedestrian was struck by a truck because he was a worse person than I am. And likewise, if I make it to age ninety without a scratch on me, I should not suppose that God is more pleased with me than anyone else. God does not deal in karma. Jesus says so: **“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? I tell you, no...Or those eighteen that were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think they were worse sinners than all the people in Jerusalem? I tell you, no.”**

So that’s not why. But then...why? Jesus gives us one of the many answers to why tragedies happen: to remind us to repent: **“But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”** This he says twice. When I hear a

story of tragic death, I am to remember: I am just as sinful as the person who perished. And so my body will perish one day, too. If not in an accident, then by cancer or old age or whatever. But I will perish one day. And I need to be ready. Because whether in an accident tomorrow or in nursing home in fifty years, I will perish. And if I am not ready with a repentant heart, I will perish for eternity. **“But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”**

So, when you hear a story of tragedy, is your first thought, “I should take this opportunity to repent, to be sure I’m ready when my time comes.”? I wonder if we have become so used to hearing tragic stories that they don’t affect us much at all anymore. Thanks to a constant news cycle and news availability from all over the world, we hear a lot more terrible news than people used to. The people bringing the news of Pilate’s slaughter and the tower’s collapse at Siloam were probably not so jaded to news like that. But we are becoming more and more hardened to it, so we may not react to it much at all.

And, if we do, it may be an attempt to pry open the mind of God and find answers he is not supplying. Okay, God, if it’s not karma, then what is it? Why? Demanding answers from God – who owes us none – is a common reaction, too. But “repent”? When do we ever do that after hearing hard news? Well, our Savior tells us that is one reason God allows these things to happen: so those who live through them will remember their own mortality and prepare their hearts so that on the day they die, they die only physically, and live on in heaven.

Jesus states it negatively: **“But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”** But in countless in places, Scripture also tilts this truth in a positive and promising direction: Repent and you will live. Your body will die, sure. But you will never die.

Why does Scripture from cover to cover equate repentance to life that never ends? Because repentance begins by looking honestly at our sins. Not just the wrong things we do, but the right things we’ve failed to do (many of which we may not even be aware of). It looks at impure thoughts and thoughtless words that hurt. And it doesn’t stop there. Repentance also sees the sin we are: the sin we are born with and the sinful nature that clings to us throughout our lives. Repentance starts by seeing sin.

But then repentance turns with all that sinfulness and drops it all – the sin I do and the sin I am – and drops it all at Jesus’ cross. Repentance turns back to baptism’s waters and remembers how the Spirit brought my Savior into my heart. Repentance approaches the altar and receives the body and blood that Jesus gave to forgive those sins. In short, repentance turns to Jesus. And he takes it all away.

This is why repentance is life: it looks to Jesus in faith, and he not only takes away the sin, but the eternal punishment it deserves. Faith in Jesus is the end of eternal death, and the beginning of eternal life. Even at death, the soul lives on with the Savior in heaven. And this repentant faith is also looking to the one who left his own grave behind on Easter morning. So it looks forward to following him out on the Last Day.

But repentance does even more than this. After it turns to Jesus with all sin for full forgiveness, it then turns away from those sins in life. The repentant Christians always strives to live more and more according to the will of God, leaving behind the sins for which Jesus suffered and died. Scripture calls this God-pleasing life “the fruits of repentance.” And Jesus teaches us about it with this parable: **“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any.”** Already we see that God expects to see this fruit of repentance in the life of his people. When it’s not there, it’s big trouble.

It's a sign that the Christian's repentance is fading. **"So he said to the gardener, 'Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?'"** Thing one: God is very patient in waiting for these fruits of repentance. Three years is an awfully long time for the owner of a vineyard to wait for an unproductive tree to start making fruit. But thing two: trees that don't bear fruit do finally end up in a bad place: **"Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?"** God's patience does not last forever.

But the gardener said replied to him, 'Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, cut it down.'" Behold! Even more patience! Give it yet another year! But still the ominous warning: there does need to be fruit.

So, here is what we need to do. God the Holy Spirit is the gardener who works on us so that we will bear the fruit God desires. So, let him work on you. Let him show you the gospel of Jesus' love for you over and over and over. Let him do it in the rich variety of ways God offers. He delivers the gospel in stories, poetry, letters, and prophecies. The Bible's a big, rich, book and the gospel of Jesus stands front and center. Use it. The Spirit will work on you. Remember how he brought you to faith in baptism, and the forgiveness of sins you received there. The Spirit will work on you. Come to Jesus' Supper to taste and see his gospel love for you. The Spirit will work on you.

And then: bear the fruit God desires. With Jesus' saving love in your heart, look at your life closely. If you're stealing, whether it's money or time from your boss by slacking at work...knock it off. Be content with your own money or work harder. If you're thoughtless toward your spouse, buy some candy or write a poem or whatever it is you're supposed to do. If you've been greedy, give some money away. I know this all sounds obvious and simple. But when the people of Judea went out to John the Baptist to ask him how to produce the fruits of repentance, he kept things very simple: Share your clothes and food, he told the crowds. Stop stealing, he told the tax collectors. Don't rob from people, he told the soldiers.

So, just look at what in your life needs improving, and go for it. But don't go for it alone. Go for it with Jesus in your heart. God has given you the gift of a repentant heart. He has turned you to your Savior for grace and forgiveness. Let the Spirit work on you, and keep working on you, with Jesus' love. And in his gospel love, produce the fruits of repentance. Amen.