

Lent 3 C. March 24, 2019. Luke 13:1-9.

I grew up Pentecostal. Obviously, things have changed for me, but I remain grateful to the church of my upbringing for convincing me that faith matters; that my life should be different because of what I believe. *What* I believed started changing because of the same stuff that is at play in this gospel story. We're reading this text today because of its call to repentance (which is fitting for Lent), but what's at stake here is the divine and human response to suffering. What causes people to suffer? What is the relationship between sin and suffering? What is God doing while we sin or suffer?

These questions became pressing for me when I was a teenager and the answers I had inherited fell apart, as easy answers to the questions that matter always will. I still have cousins who would be at home among Jesus' interlocutors—I do not say his enemies. It is a commonplace in much of the bible, as it still is among my cousins and certain doddering televangelists, that tragedy is always caused by God's wrath at our sinfulness. This is fine as long as your own life is going really well and you don't, you know, read the whole bible and especially any of the parts that have Jesus in them.

When my older brother was severely and permanently injured in a car accident, it wasn't very long before we started hearing the whispers that Jesus seems to be hearing in this passage: who sinned? And, since we were Pentecostal and so believed in guaranteed spontaneous miraculous healing, the inevitable follow up: who is continuing to sin? These types of questions have remained vitally important to me ever since they broke my childhood faith and sent me careening into a tradition where God could save me. I suspect that they are crucial questions for many of you, and I hope that I don't offer any easy answers today. Instead I hope to invite you more deeply into trust and hope.

No one actually asks this question of Jesus in today's story—he's the one who brings it up, which suggests to me that this assumption is widespread enough that Jesus just knows that people are thinking about it, without them even having to say it. Jesus does three things in response to this assumed question. First, he absolutely and categorically rejects the notion that God's wrath is the cause of every tragedy. He does this comprehensively. The people have brought him an instance of human evil, Pilate murdering Galileans while they were at worship. This happened because Pilate was wicked, not because the victims were. And then Jesus brings up an instance of people killed in a kind of natural disaster, the collapse of the tower at Siloam. This also was not the fault of the victims.

Now look, sometimes pain is the result of our actions, and sometimes sin is its own punishment. If we drink too much, we have a hangover. If we are cruel to a spouse, we might break the marriage, hurting everyone. If we buy a house in Oak Park, we will have a leaky basement. But these are not God's punishments. They are just the way the world works. And sometimes terrible things happen and we don't know why—and Jesus insists that our ignorance is not an invitation to blame the victims.

But our ignorance also isn't an invitation to apathy. The second thing Jesus does is tell us what the human response to tragedy should be: repentance. I think there's something more going on here than "get right with the Lord, because your day is coming." That is here, clearly, but this is not "repent or God will cause something awful to happen to you." It is "repent, because awful things happen, and we cannot face them without God."

We can think of this call to repentance as most folks do—as preparation for an afterlife. But I think it's even more helpful as preparation for life, for the terrible impossible things that happen in this beautiful, difficult life. Repenting is coming to our senses, turning around to head back toward relationship with God, allowing our vision to be transformed by the encounter with grace. It will not really prevent terrible things from happening—it will give us the courage to face those terrible things honestly as our true selves, buttressed by an awareness of the love of God. Repent or perish isn't a threat. It's a realistic estimate of just how much grief we can take and stay ourselves without drawing on the deep wells of the grace of God.

And third, Jesus tells us what the divine response is to human suffering and wickedness. In Luke, parables often get interpreted before they are told. So this parable of the fig tree is "about" what God is up to when bad things are happening. And the gentle beautiful answer is that God is advocating for us, rooting for us, tending us with patience and hope, like a gardener coaxing figs out of an uncooperative tree. And of course the harder part is that God is also tending our enemies, even Pilate. Holding the door open for all of us to turn, to come to our senses, to allow ourselves to be transformed. Amen.