

Lent 3C, February 28, 2016. Luke 13:1-9

I used to read a lot of Sherlock Holmes stories. What I especially liked about them is that they assured me that even though terrible things sometimes happen, the world fundamentally makes sense, if only we're smart enough to figure it out. The basic structure of a Sherlock Holmes story goes like this: a client comes into the famous rooms at 221b Baker Street and tells Sherlock and Dr. Watson a story. Maybe something has been stolen, or someone has been killed, or the client has reason to fear for her life, or just something strange and frightening happened. Crucially, though, the story doesn't make sense—there is something inexplicable, absurd, or just missing, with the result that the whole thing is baffling and the fear and grief in the situation are magnified.

Sherlock and Watson investigate. Sometimes they find a stolen item, or catch a killer, or prevent an impending crime. But not always—sometimes the client herself dies. But what matters is that the short story ends back in the flat at 221b Baker Street, where Sherlock tells the client's story again, usually just to Watson. And this time he fills in the missing pieces, corrects the mistakes, untangles the knot of relationships so that all is clear and ordered and reasonable. The events of the story may have been tragic, but at the end, they make sense. It just takes someone really smart to figure out how.

This kind of fable is immensely appealing to me and I suspect that it is at least subconsciously part of the great appeal of Sherlock Holmes. Of course we would prefer that tragedy never strike, but when it does, we need to know why. Who is to blame? What went wrong? What can we change so that this never happens again? And sometimes, how could God allow this person to be sick, that person to die, me to be so profoundly unfortunate and deeply unhappy? The questions of who, how, and why in response to tragedy are sometimes about vengeance, correction, or prevention, but I think they're also just about our basic need for our lives and our world to make sense. If we can only understand, then it won't hurt so bad.

I think this dynamic will be familiar to most of us, at least in terms of our shared public life. When our country has its weekly mass shooting, we look for reasons: is the person mentally ill, or a part of a terrorist network or militia, or a member of a gang, or what are the gun laws in the state where the shooter lives? With a natural disaster, we get competing explanations for why: with scientists talking about climate, policy makers talking about infrastructure, and televangelists talking about the wrath of God (by the way, I do not mean to equate the value of those explanations). And we do it with illness: what are the causes, what behavioral factors might change things, what will happen if we treat and treat and treat.

I'm not in any way disparaging these efforts to understand the causes and "reasons for" suffering. I think that when we stop asking these questions, something fundamental about being human will have changed. But something rather different happens in today's gospel story. I think these folks who come to Jesus asking about the Galileans who were murdered by the state are looking for some kind of political-religious interpretation. They are looking for reasons why, the same way we do.

But Jesus doesn't do the Sherlock Holmes thing. He doesn't stitch the world back together after the ripping of the trauma. I wish he had. But Jesus isn't here trying to set our minds at ease—he is trying to shake us out of an ease that we are too likely to fabricate for ourselves. It's maybe a little bit unclear at first what Jesus is saying here, but

one thing is totally clear: Jesus forbids absolutely all forms of victim-blaming. He states unequivocally that God does not use suffering and death as punishment for sin. “Do you think that they suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than everyone else? No I tell you.”

A little background helps us see just how strongly Jesus means this. His questioners provide him with the example of the Galileans who were killed by Pilate. But he provides the example of folks from Jerusalem who were killed when a tower collapsed. Galilee is where Jesus was from, way up in the North of Israel. Jerusalem was the capitol way down in the South of Israel. One instance of suffering is clearly the result of one person’s evil action; the other is more like a natural disaster, where it isn’t clear who, if anyone, might be at fault. Whether you’re from the North or the South, whether the suffering comes from an individual’s direct action or a more indirect stroke of bad luck, we may never attribute suffering to divine retribution.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. There’s a thing that tends to happen when people ask questions of Jesus. People come to him perhaps looking for answers, and find instead that he asks much deeper questions of them. “What about those people who were killed?” And Jesus’ response is “What about you?” The flip-side of the fact that these people didn’t die because of their sin is that our righteousness isn’t a fail-safe protection against suffering. This is the false notion that Jesus is trying to shake us out of. We, too, are called to repent—a notion that is much stronger than just feeling sorry about the bad things that we did and apologizing. The call here to repent is a call to come to our senses, to mold our whole way of life into conformity with God’s dreams for our lives and the world. It’s not “say you’re sorry, pay your debts, and make sure your checkbook is balanced.” It’s “change your life, move from where you are to God’s side.” That doesn’t mean that disaster won’t strike—but it does mean that you will be who you need to be if and when it does.

What does it mean to be on God’s side? Well, I think the parable the ends our lesson today can give some help. It is not the case that God is the landowner and Jesus is the gardener buying us a little bit more time before a vengeful God chops us down. Nowhere in Luke is God portrayed in that way. If any of these characters are anyone in an allegorical sense, then our perceptions are the landowner and God is the gardener. There’s a tree that isn’t putting forth any fruit, a tree that is in danger of being chopped down. God’s side is the side that neither says “Oh well, go ahead and destroy it” nor “Well, if it can’t pull its weight then there’s nothing we can do.”

God gets down in the dirt, digging ditches and spreading manure. God’s side is the side that is willing to get dirty to help someone in danger of perishing, that is willing to work with AHEM to bring others to flourishing. The side that is willing to be patient with long labor to cultivate the gifts that lie buried in someone else’s life. And we of course are both the tree—the subject of God’s long patience and enduring toil—and the assistant gardener—called to be down in the dirt with God building the conditions for other people’s fruit to grow.

When tragedy occurs, let’s by all means try to figure out why. Let’s by all means try to restore sense to our lives. But let’s be clear that we are not being punished, and that God is working hard to bring us to our full glorious flower. And when tragedy strikes elsewhere, let’s look for the why but also, let’s do what Jesus calls us to do. Look at our hands. Are they dirty with the work of helping the imperiled to flourish? Are they dirty with the work of the kingdom of God? Amen.