

## Unless You Repent...

### Luke 13:1-9

At the end of every good action movie the bad guy finally gets what's coming to him. And when the hero dispatches the villain, all seems right in the world. This final judgment is well deserved and proves that the wicked will be punished. After all, we all like to believe in cosmic comeuppance.

In this week's gospel text those listening to Jesus speak ask him to comment on some "current events" of the day - the unexpected and untimely deaths of some "Galileans" slaughtered by Pilate and the death of those crushed by the "tower of Siloam". You won't read about these events in scripture, but you will in other literature of the day.

Historian Josephus records the death of a number of Galileans by Pilate while they were performing a ritual sacrifice of their own. Those questioning Jesus hope to hear him affirm that it was an act of divine judgment and those slain must have somehow been "worse sinners" than all others.

The crowd is voicing the theology of Deuteronomy 28-30. There you'll read that those who obey God's commandments are rewarded while those who turn away from God suffer divine judgment and reap despair, illness, imprisonment, hunger, poverty, and death (see also Job 4:17; Ezekiel 18:26).

Jesus will have none of it and refuses to make such a straight-line assessment of the Galilean tragedy. Refusing to divide the world into "good guys" and "bad guys," into "us" vs. "them", Jesus instead declares the need for universal repentance. All of "us" are "them" he says, and without the act of repentance this world of "worse sinners" will perish.

Likewise, Jesus offers his own example to the crowd regarding the "eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them." (Josephus, "Jewish War" 5:145).

While Jesus doesn't absolve any of those who perished, neither does he find them any different than the whole population of Jerusalem. All Galileans, all Jerusalemites, all the people of this world stand on common ground, on broken ground, in a broken relationship with God. It is from this common place of brokenness that all need to repent and seek God's mercy.

The parable of the fig tree — found in narrative format in Mark 11 and Matthew 21 — offers a final, hopeful note on this theme of repentance. While in Mark and Matthew the fruitless fig tree is soundly cursed by Jesus, here in Luke the puny producer earns a reprieve.

In the context of Jesus' message to "repent," this is the fig tree's opportunity to "repent" of its barrenness. And instead of being soundly cursed for its bare branches, in our lesson today the puny plant is granted a second change — a chance to "repent" and demonstrate its change of "heart" with quantifiable fruitfulness.

What Christians say right after a disaster is disastrous and downright embarrassing.

**Sometimes the most horrible things are said about God when people try to say the nicest things about Him.** Here are some of the worst offenders.

a) "They didn't deserve this." -especially said after a murder. To say that some didn't deserve this is to say that others did. Does anyone ever deserve suffering, pain, evil, rape, much less murder?

b) "It's part of God's plan." -evil and suffering are part of God's plan? Hello!?! Madness, mayhem and murder are NEVER part of God's plan.

c) "They're in a better place." -God values this life and expects us to value and not take this life for granted. We insult the Giver by not enjoying the gifts we've been given here and now.

d) "It's a reflection of how far we've fallen away from God." -Do people really think that a good, beautiful, true God would raise up a shooter to kill or create tragedy to make us repent?

And it's not just church people in the pew mouthing bad, ugly, false theology. You hear pastors say it, too. Even insurance companies pile on and use the term "act of God" to describe a natural disaster.

Friends, acts of God are not hurricanes or rapes or murders or disasters. **Acts of God are love, and compassion, and mercy.**

This is what Jesus is sharing in our text this morning, which shows that Jesus knows what's on the front page of the paper (so to speak) and that people engage him in conversation about the hottest news and most current events.

And it wasn't just a message of repentance that these "current events" carried. Jesus used these up-to-the-minute examples to show his listeners that all human beings were trapped in the same leaking, listing boat. All of us are doomed for disaster. All of us need the merciful hand of God.

**We're midway through Lent, a season, or at least a few minutes, of introspective soul searching.** Lent is a time to re-evaluate our life, to consider new possibilities, to explore the life-altering options Christ has offers to us. Lent is a time for repentance.

The real "current event" Jesus was communicating to his audience was not about any Galileans who had been massacred or any worshipers who died under the weight of a tumbling tower in Siloam.

Rather, it was about the greatest and most eternally ongoing "current event" ever revealed - that God loves us and wants us to be in a safe, saving, sanctified relationship with the Divine. The greatest current event is the currency of God's love.

Jesus, the "new Adam," the new tender of the garden, argues to save the barren fig tree, to give our barren lives, our fruitless existences, one more chance — which he offers through his own sacrifice.

- One more chance at repentance.
- One more chance for truth.
- One more chance for beauty.
- One more chance for goodness.
- One more chance to experience the acceptance and love of God the Father.

The "current event" Jesus preached was not "ripped" from any headline but reaped from God's creative love. God loves us. Jesus loves us.