

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Justin Johnson
Our Saviour's Lutheran Church Bellingham, WA
3rd Sunday in Lent March 7, 2010
Text: Luke 13:1-9

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and from Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Could we have a more fitting story for today from the gospel of Luke? About a month ago, I met with some other pastors and we were looking at this reading and the other readings for the Sundays in Lent and we were already thinking of this text in terms of what happened in Haiti. And then last Saturday, there was another earthquake in Chile. Two major natural disasters that have happened rather close to one another.

These natural disasters and other tragedies often leave us questioning and evaluating. We question why something happened, and we often find a reason. And then we evaluate our own lives to make sure that that reason is not present in our own lives.

When disaster strikes or tragedy comes, we often try to make sense of what happened. We need to have some kind of reason. We try to create some kind of order. We look for a solid reason as to why something might have happened.

We do this not only with major natural disasters, but we do it with all things. If someone gets cancer, we search for a reason and make a judgment as to why someone has cancer. Sometimes there is a direct correlation: someone who smoked all their life has lung cancer. Sometimes there is not any reason for someone to have cancer.

No matter what it is, we try to make sense of it and often this leads to us making a judgment about someone else. They must have done something to deserve it, it is the universe getting even, it is karma, or it is God's punishment. We find all sorts of ways to rationalize something that does not make sense to us.

However, so many times, there is no good reason as to why tragedy or illness besets one person or a group of people over another. But we like to assign blame. We like to make a judgment as to why some group or person suffers and we do not. It helps us to feel safe and in control. If we can

assign blame as to why something happened, then we can avoid the same plight. We confess that God is in control, thus if something bad happened to another and not us, they must be worse sinners than we are.

This assigning blame, this thinking others are worse sinners than us, is not a new thing. It was happening in Jesus time as we see in our gospel reading for today. Some people come to Jesus and ask him about a tragedy of the day. There were some Galileans who were offering sacrifices in the temple and they were killed and their blood was mixed with the blood of the sacrifices. It is not hard to image that people must have figured that these Galileans had done something terrible to die like this.

Well how does Jesus respond? He takes this head on. He asks “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered in this way?” And we want the answer to be “Yes,” so that there is some logic involved, so that there is some reason as to why this tragedy happened. It is too unsettling to live in a world where bad stuff happens for no apparent reason. Jesus answers his own question, but with little explanation. His simple answer is not “yes,” like we want, but it is “No.” But then he uses this moment to wake up his hearers. “No, but I tell you unless you repent you will perish just as they did.”

And then Jesus takes up another tragedy. A tower in Jerusalem fell and killed 18 people. An accident that claimed lives. Again Jesus asks the question, “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem? Again we want the answer to be “Yes,” but it is not. Jesus again quickly answers, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Jesus dispels any notion that somehow these people who suffered were worse sinners, and he does take this opportunity to call all his hearers to repentance. Now the Greek word that is used for repentance has meanings of “a change of heart and mind.”

Jesus uses this opportunity to call for people to examine their lives. And this opportunity for repentance is an opportunity for a change of heart, an opportunity for a change of mind. This repentance is an opportunity to live in the fullness of God’s grace and love. To move from living in fear that you will be struck down for your sins, to living in freedom. To move from

judging others as worse sinners to thinking about what good news might look like to them.

This opportunity for repentance is an opportunity to bear fruit. It is like the owner giving more time for the fig tree to bear fruit at the gardener's request.

This opportunity for a change of heart and change of mind, this call for repentance that we hear Jesus issuing is pure grace. It is like the gardener giving more time for the fig tree to bear fruit. It is a chance to begin again, it is an invitation to a new life. It is the grace of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ our Lord through the cross. For it is there that our sins are put to death in Jesus Christ. It is there that the punishment for sin is paid for the whole world and for you and for me. It is through the cross that we are given new life.

And it is in the cross, in the life, death, and resurrection of God's son Jesus that we come to know that God's ways are not our ways nor are God's thoughts our thoughts. For God is not the eternal bean counter keeping track of demerits, bad deeds, and sins. He is not up there with lightning bolts in his hands waiting to unleash his fury on those who we judge as worse sinners. No, God's ways are not our ways. That is how we operate. We keep score, we keep track of how we are doing and we keep track of how our neighbor is doing so that we know if our neighbor is going to be struck down before us. And we know if we are earning God's love.

I think of the commercial for Las Vegas, you know the motto: "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." In the commercial, a guy dies and is standing before the pearly gates. And someone is looking through a big book that appears to have all of the man's deeds, good and bad, recorded. However, as the angel is looking through the book, there is a big section that is blank for this man's life. And the angel is confused as if he knows what this man has done. And then the slogan comes in, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas."

It is like that with God. Our deeds, good and bad may be recorded, but when it comes time to be judged, there will be nothing there, for in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven.

For God's ways are not our ways, for God gives freely and abundantly to all who thirst and hunger, calling all who thirst to come to the waters. Calling to those who have no money to come, buy and eat. God's love is abundant and free for you and for me. And it is a love that will not leave us alone. God works in our lives, loosening soil, spreading manure, so that we will bear fruit and not just waste the soil.

Thanks be to God. Amen.