

March 24, 2019

Sermon

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Scripture Reading: Luke 13:1-9

13At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

6Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' 8He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Last week we talked about the horrible massacre of Muslims at worship in New Zealand and our need to stand up to religious hatred in the world. We talked about how some religious hatred finds its roots in the protestant Christian community. And how we need to stand up to hatred especially when it is done in the name of God, and especially when it comes from within our own religion.

Well, I read some revealing and sad facts about the spread of hatred this week. As you may have heard, the shooter in New Zealand had a video camera strapped to his head and filmed the entire massacre, and he live-streamed it on Facebook for the whole world to see. During the streaming of the video, which was 17 minutes long, not one single person who watched it reported it to Facebook to have it taken down. The first report didn't come in until 12 minutes after the video finished, at which point Facebook immediately deleted the video. In the next 24 hours the video was share 1.5 million times on Facebook!

Once Facebook learns of a video like that, they can add it to their filter which will detect when someone else tries to upload it and share it and it will be instantly blocked. Unfortunately, the filter can only detect exact copies of the original video. If someone takes the time to alter the video even a little, then they can upload it and the filter won't detect it until someone else reports the copy. Well, Facebook says they have now found over 800 variations of the original video from people trying to bypass the filter to continue to share it.

Like any horrible tragedy, people are just drawn to watch.

Evil spreads so fast! Especially in this digital age.

So, where does evil come from?

This is something that Christians have wrestled with for generations. As we believe that God is the source and creator of all life, this has led some Christians to conclude that God must therefore allow evil to happen. That when bad things happen, it must be part of God's plan.

I hear this at funerals far too often. When people speak of the death, saying, "It must have just been God's time for them." As if it was God's plan for the person to die. Or, "we just can't understand God's ways. We have to just trust this is part of God's will." This sentiment is especially cruel when the death is tragic or premature in some way. To tell the mourners that this tragic death must be part of God's plan is horrible.

People have blamed God for all sorts of tragedies.

People have blamed cancer as being God's punishment for bad living. They've blamed AIDS as being God's punishment for the so-called sin of homosexuality. They've blamed tornadoes and hurricanes and other world disasters as being God's punishment for evil living. One Republican politician in the States, from Ohio, actually said that the wildfires in California were God's punishment for liberals!

I thought for sure by now some wingnut would have been publishing how the massacre in New Zealand last week was God's punishment for the evil of Islam. Thankfully I haven't found anything like that. Instead, what I found was people of all faiths coming together all over the world to surround their local mosques with circles of prayer. This is wonderful!

But I did find another example of blaming God. Do you remember the shooting at the gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida back in 2016 where 20 patrons were killed? The father of the shooter in that incident said that the killing was God's punishment for the evil of homosexuality.

It's horrible that some people of faith actually think like this.

So, where do people get the idea that tragedies are God's punishment for evil living? Well, to be fair, this kind of understanding has its roots deep in our own religious tradition. Our ancient religious ancestors believed that anything good that happened to them was God's blessing and reward for their faithfulness and anything bad that happened to them – failed crops, wars, disasters, etc – was God's punishment on them for unfaithful living. They believed that God controlled everything that happened. And good things must be God rewarding them. And bad things must be God punishing them.

Here's just one example: In 2 Samuel 24, we find that King David decided to take a census of the men of fighting age. The prophet Gad was sent to David to announce God's displeasure with the taking of the census. The punishment for David's sin was: (2 Samuel 24:15) "The Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died".

That's what it says in the bible.

So, the people of Israel were struck by a plague that killed 70,000 people, and they interpreted that as God's punishment for the actions of their king.

If something bad happens, it must be God's will, and it must be God's punishment.

And there are many other examples like that in the Old Testament.

Which brings us to today's Bible reading...

It begins with some Israelites coming to Jesus to tell him about their fellow Jews that Pilate killed and mixed their blood with the sacrifices. Now, this incident doesn't come up anywhere else in the Bible, and there's no record of it in any secular history records, so we don't actually know what incident Luke is referring to in this passage.

We do know two things: we know that the Israelites, at that time, still practiced animal sacrifices as part of their worship. And we know that Pilate had attacked the Jewish people in the past when they had complained against him. So, presumably, here, something happened to provoke Pilate's anger against the Jewish people and he had the soldiers kill a bunch of the Israelites while they were in the middle of practicing their animal sacrifices, essentially, while they were at worship.

Just like the Muslims in New Zealand were killed while they were at worship.

Were they killed because of their sins? Today we would think that's a horrible question to ask. But that's exactly the question that Jesus puts to the crowd. Because some people actually think that way.

Jesus asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" So, presumably the people believed that this mass killing was God's punishment for some unknown sin.

To which Jesus says, "No!" Flat out, no! Essentially, he saying, "We're all sinners. We all fall short of God's will. Those people that Pilate killed weren't any worse than you are. They weren't killed because God was punishing them. They were killed because Pilate is a tyrant. It's got nothing to do with God."

So, Jesus completely rejects the idea that God makes bad things happen to people as a means of punishing them.

However, then Jesus adds a caution. He says, "unless you repent, you will perish just like them." So, what does he mean by this? He seems to be contradicting himself. Well, hold that thought for a moment and we'll come back to it.

Then he says, "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Again here, just like Pilate's murder of the worshippers, the incident isn't mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, and there's no contemporary historical record of any Tower of Siloam falling and killing 18 people. So, we have no idea what the actual incident is that Jesus is referring to. Some commentators have speculated that it may have been a tower holding up an aqueduct. But, others have said that the Pool of Siloam was at ground level, so there was no aqueduct system there. So, we really have no clue what actually happened.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that a tragic accident happened. A tower fell and killed 18 people. And, like the other incident, the people believed this tragedy must be God's punishment for some unknown sin. That the people somehow deserved to die because they were bad people.

Again, Jesus rejects this idea. He says, "No!" Flat out, no! Essentially, he's saying, "They didn't die because they were any worse sinners than you are. We're all sinners. We all fall short of God's will. Those 18 people died because of a tragic accident, and only that. It had nothing to do with God."

So, for a second time, Jesus completely rejects the idea that God makes bad things happen to people as a means of punishing them.

And, then again, Jesus adds the same caution. He says, "unless you repent, you'll perish just like them." So, what does he mean by this?

The people who are questioning Jesus are more concerned about the sinfulness of the people who died than they are with their own sinfulness. Like most judgemental people, they're passing judgement on the bad circumstances of others because it makes them feel better about themselves. Because, for someone who believes that God uses tragedies to punish bad people, the reverse of that must mean, that if a tragedy is not happening to me then I must be good in God's eyes. And I don't have to worry about how I'm living my life.

But Jesus says no to that whole worldview. He says we're all sinners. None of us is any better or any worse than anyone else. We're all created equally good, and we also all fail at some point. And by focussing on the sins of others, they're excusing themselves from having to look into their own hearts to repent of the darkness that lies in their own hearts.

So, Jesus is saying, the same as he has said many times before: stop obsessing about the sins of other people, and take a look into your own heart, and change what you need to change in your own heart in order to get right with God. That was good advice then, and it's good advice now.

But what about this repent or *perish* bit? Perish? Is Jesus saying that if they don't turn their lives around then God will punish them with death? Isn't that exactly what Jesus just finished saying "no" to?

Not exactly. "Perish", here, can't mean "to die" because we all die eventually. Whether we sin and repent, or just continue sinning boldly with no remorse, eventually we're all going to die. In this case, the word here that is translated as "perish" doesn't mean death. It means "ending". And, the same word is used elsewhere in the Gospels in reference to eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It's used to express the opposite of experiencing eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Those who don't experience eternal life will "perish." In other words, they won't get to experience the glory and peace of the eternal Kingdom of God. They'll miss out on it.

If you don't turn your life around, and get right with God, then you'll miss out on the eternal glories that God has in store for you. So, stop worrying about the sins of other people, and worry about how you're living your own life. Are you right with God? If not, then get right with God.

This is still the season of Lent. Lent is the season of preparing for Easter. Easter is the time when we celebrate the miracle of the Resurrection. The proof that God's love is stronger than even death. So, Lent is the time to prepare your heart to celebrate God's eternal gift of love and forgiveness. Lent is the perfect time to stop focussing on the sins of other people, and focus on yourself, and get your own heart right with God.

So, heed Jesus' warning, and take the time, now, to get your life right with God.