

Luke 13:1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 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? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Luke 13:6 Then 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. 7 So 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?’ 8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

BAD THINGS, GOOD PEOPLE

Why do bad things happen to good people? That sermon title was borrowed from Rabbi Harold Kushner who wrote a book on this topic.

It was no idle question for the Rabbi. His own son had a debilitating and terminal disease. And he asked the question that many people ask when bad things come into their life. Why me? Why did God let this happen to me?

The theologians of Jesus' day had no trouble answering that question. They said, "Bad things don't happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. If something bad has come into your life, you must have done something wrong."

Some of you may remember the Old Testament story of Job. This was the answer that some of Job's friends gave him when tragedy came into his life. They said, "Think real hard about your life. Surely something this bad wouldn't have happened to you unless you have sinned in some significant way. What did you do wrong? Repent of your sin and maybe God will be merciful."

We see the same kind of thinking in the New Testament as well. Jesus and his disciples encountered a man who had been blind from birth. And the question that Jesus' disciples wanted answered was: "Who sinned? This man or his parents." They believed that a tragedy of this magnitude couldn't come to someone who was righteous. There had to be a reason.

This kind of thinking is still around today. When the earthquake in Haiti occurred, many people were asking why? This is one of the poorest places in the world. Why did this have to happen now? It seems like the people of Haiti can't catch a break. Television evangelist Pat Robertson had a ready answer,

“Something happened a long time ago in Haiti ... Haitians were originally under the heel of the French ... and they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, we will serve you if you will get us free from the French. True story. And so, the devil said, okay it's a deal. Ever since they have been cursed by one thing or another.”

How Pat knows all this I'm not sure, but his explanation is typical of those who think that there is a one to one correspondence between what we do and what we get. If we do good we're blessed. If we do bad, we're cursed.

Though many would recoil from such a simplistic and misleading argument, I have found that many people live their lives believing something like this. And when tragedy comes into their lives (as it will inevitably come into all our lives) they become very bitter and angry with God ... and often with other people.

Why did this happen to me? I'm not that bad a person. I go to church each week. I pay my bills. I pay my taxes. I eat right. I exercise.

Why did this happen to me?

RAINS ON THE JUST AND THE UNJUST

The Bible tells us that rains on the just and unjust alike. Blessings and curses are not necessarily doled out according to who is good and who is bad.

Sometimes it may seem like all the evil people are getting ahead and all the good people are dying young. But, in this passage Jesus tells us that we are not to draw any conclusions from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

The Christian faith is not a talisman that prevents us from having bad luck. Indeed, as I have said many times, since the cross is at the center of the faith, and since Jesus said that his disciples must take up a cross and follow him, sometimes suffering and sacrifice come to us because of what we believe.

But, the tragedies in today's lesson are not so much about suffering that comes from faithful discipleship. The

tragedies in today's lesson are about people who were at the wrong place at the wrong time.

We know about that. Think about those people who were killed in the World Trade Center on September 11. Was there any rhyme or reason to that killing? Of course not. They simply had the misfortune to be in the building on that fateful day.

Many people came to church that next Sunday who usually didn't come to church. It looked like the crowd on an Easter Sunday. I think I know why they came. They wanted to know why this happened. They wanted some kind of an answer for an event that seemed so random and tragic.

But, they were disappointed. I didn't have an answer. I still don't have an answer. Why some people think it is okay to kill innocent people to make a political point has always proved to be a great mystery to me.

We talk a lot about tragedies. They evoke a sense of fear and morbid fascination. We may even wonder, "How much time do I have left? Could an unspeakable tragedy like this happen in my life?"

What's this world coming to? What's my world coming to?"

IF IT BLEEDS IT LEADS

Does that sound familiar? Many of us play “ain’t it awful” as we watch the evening news, but we still watch. And those who broadcast the news know it. That old saying “if it bleeds it leads” is still true.

We might say that we want good news, but the news we watch and the news we talk about is the really bad news. Often the tragedies occur in some other place or in a bad neighborhood where we expect “that kind of thing”. But, when the tragedy strikes close to home, when it hits someone that we know, we have a harder time putting it out of our mind.

In our passage for today Jesus talks about a terrible tragedy. Some Galileans had apparently threatened the Romans in some way. And as punishment Pilate killed these Galileans and mixed their blood with the blood of the animals that were being sacrificed in the temple.

We have no historical record of this, but we have no reason to doubt that it happened. The Jewish historian, Josephus gives us numerous examples of the cruelty of Pilate that were equally as bad.

Anyway, apparently someone has asked Jesus about this incident. And the question was something like, “Why did this terrible thing happen to these Galileans? Were they bad people? Did they deserve this terrible fate and this terrible sacrilege?”

And Jesus said, “Don’t think that these Galileans were worse sinners than any other Galileans. They were just in the wrong place in the wrong time. Let me give you another example. Think about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower fell on them at Siloam. Do you think they were worse sinners? Not at all.

LIFE IS SHORT AND UNCERTAIN

But, learn the lesson of these tragic events. Life is short and uncertain. None of us knows what tomorrow might bring so we have to make things right with God today. Now is the time to repent. Now is the time to go in God’s direction instead of your own direction. None of us know how much time we have left.

Now that’s a hard message to preach. In some ways it too harsh and judgmental for decent and orderly Presbyterians like ourselves. But, unfortunately it’s what Jesus was saying, and it’s the truth.

The people asked Jesus, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and Jesus said, “Don’t waste your time with such questions. You’re not God.

But, know this. The time you have on this earth is precious and important. Start living with a sense of purpose. Life is not just one thing after another. Life is God’s precious gift.”

THE TORN PLACES IN OUR LIFE

In this sense tragedies can be used by God for good.

Don’t misunderstand. God is not the author of tragedy. God is not out to get us. But, God can use tragedies (tragedies that befall all mortal human beings) as a way of drawing us closer to the eternal.

Barbara Brown Taylor put it well. She wrote,

“The torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.”

I don’t know about you, but I have lots of torn places in my life. I have lots of fears. They are fears born of

experience. I know from experience that the worst can happen. I try to tamp that fear deep down inside me.

But, when there is a great calamity ... when a terrorist attacks ... when an earthquake destroys I can no longer keep those torn places in my life in the background. I am reminded once again that I am mortal. I am reminded once again of the fragility and uncertainty of life.

REPENT

How can we deal with the fragility and uncertainty of life? According to Jesus, this is the real question that we need to ask and answer. And his one word answer is this, “Repent.”

I bet some of you don't like that answer. It sounds so negative, so back woods, so John the Baptist.

I think we've got the wrong idea about repentance. Repentance isn't primarily a negative term. It isn't about feeling guilty. It doesn't mean that we stew all the time about what we have done wrong.

To repent means to change our priorities and go in a different direction. We have been forgiven and given a hope for life eternal. And this great blessing should enliven all that we do in life.

Each day is a gift of grace. Each day is an opportunity to turn away from the sins of the past and turn toward the God who holds. That's the essence of repentance.

When we repent, we have a wonderful moment of clarity. We understand that our lives are fragile, a precious gift from God. And we also understand that our finite lives have a purpose, and that purpose is to give God the glory.

Once again I go back to the first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism. "What is the chief end" of men and women? The chief end of men and women is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

True joy is not found in filling our lives with endless activities. True joy is living our lives with an awareness of our gracious Creator and giving thanks for all that is good in our lives this day.

Author Frederick Buechner defined repentance in this way,

"To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' [and more time looking to the future] and saying, 'Wow!'"

We don't say "wow" enough. We have no appreciation of how each moment is such a wonderful gift and an opportunity.

None of us are promised tomorrow. Random tragedy and violence strikes the good and the bad alike. If we think that there is a protective bubble around our lives because we are people of faith, we are doomed to disappointment.

THIS IS THE DAY

But, all of us can choose to make the most of today. All of us can say with the Psalmist, "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 118:24) When we receive God's precious gift of life, we also are given the responsibility to do something with that gift.

The great hymn writer Isaac Watts wrote, "There are a number of us who creep into the world to eat and sleep, and, know, not the reason were are born but only to consume the corn, devour the cattle, flesh, and fish, and leave behind an empty dish. If our tombstones when we die were not taught to flatter or lie, there's nothing better to be said than this: He's eaten all his bread, drunk up his drink and gone to bed."

I hope to have a tombstone that can say more than that!

And yet we live in a world that encourages us to be nothing more than consumers, to just leave an empty dish at the end of our days! We have done such a good job of consuming that our actions even threaten the planet on which we all live.

It is time for us to wake up to the truth. Time is short and precious, and God in Christ is calling us to go in a different direction.

THE FIG TREE

That's what the parable Jesus told was all about. In the parable a fig tree is planted in a vineyard. And for three years the owner of the vineyard came looking for figs. And every year the owner was disappointed. So the owner said,

“Times up for this tree. If it isn't going to produce fruit, I'm going to cut it down. It doesn't deserve to take up space in my vineyard.”

But, the owner's gardner said, “Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and give it some fertilizer. If it bears fruit next year, wonderful. If it doesn't, then we can cut it down.

This is a parable of grace. Those who need to repent are given the gift of time. Jesus was telling his listeners, “It’s not too late. You still have time. God is giving you a second chance. Take it! Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

FRUIT

God has graciously given all of us here today the gift of time. What are we going to do with that gift? And what kind of fruit are we called to produce?

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians there’s a list. Paul wrote that the fruit of the Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” That’s a good list. But, how can we be like that?

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I don’t feel so peaceful, patient, kind and generous. Sometimes I don’t feel like being generous and self-controlled.

But, if we can gain an eternal perspective, if we can just begin to understand the depth of God’s grace and forgiveness, then we are transformed by that grace. We realize that God has given us the gift of this day to praise

his name. We have been given the gift of this day to (out of gratitude) be gracious toward others in his name.

When I was child I was often dissatisfied with my lot in life. I always wanted to be doing something else. Many of my sentences begin with the phrase, “I wish I could do this or that or the other thing.” My exasperated father used to tell me, “Son, you’re going to wish your life away.”

I’ve learned to appreciate his words more as times has passed. These days I’m less focused on what I might do or become in the future because the future seems less clear. I have learned not to count on the future. Instead, I feel called to do the best I can this day and let the future take care of itself.

The future is, after all, in God’s capable hands.

I have no desire to wish my life away. I want to savor each moment. I want to remember that each day is a gift from God, and I want to be found doing his will when that final trumpet sounds.

NUMBER OUR DAYS

The Psalmist wrote, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Psalm 90:12 (NIV)

When I read this verse I thought of a lady who used to work with Carrollyn in North Carolina. She was a teacher, but she didn't like her job very much. As a result she was counting the days to retirement.

In fact she even made a chain out of construction paper that represented the years she had until retirement. Every year she would remove one more link in the chain and encourage herself by knowing that she was that much closer to her goal.

But, she was a relatively young person, and it was a very long chain. I thought to myself, "What a waste to spend so much time waiting for a day so far in the future."

This was not what the Psalmist meant when he talked about numbering our days.

He was talking about more than just crossing off the days on the calendar, mindlessly following the daily routine with our only hope being some glorious future retirement.

(I suspect that some of you here today can attest to the fact that retirement is not nearly as glorious as you imagined when you were younger.)

The Psalmist wants us to meditate on the fact of our mortality. The Psalmist wants us to think about what many of us try so hard to forget.

LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF ETERNITY

We have a limited number of days. How do we want to spend the time that we have left? What is really important to us? What can we do this day to further God's purpose for our life? What would it mean to live today with eternity in our hearts?

I used to think this verse was a bit morbid. Who wants to number their days? Who wants to keep mortality on the front burner?

In fact the diversions of life are often used to prevent us from thinking about it too much. What's that old saying, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die?" In other words, live an unreflective life. Don't think too much about it, and you'll be happier.

But, I have found that this kind of living only increases our anxiety about the future. We're not able to forget our mortality no matter how much we overindulge in the pleasures of life. The Bible tells us in so many places and in so many ways that it is better to embrace our mortality.

Yes, one day we will die, but it will not be a rendezvous with nothingness. It will be a time to meet our maker, the gracious judge who has revealed himself most clearly in his Son, Jesus.

And so as we face the challenges and disappointments of this present age today, we must ask ourselves,

“How should I deal with this situation in the light of all eternity? How important is all this in the grand scheme of things?”

Is it something that really requires the attention I’m giving it or is it just a distraction that will keep me from attending to the more important questions of life?”

Don’t sleep through your life. Wake up to the joy and hope that is yours this very day in Christ Jesus. The good news today is this; you still have time. Use it wisely.

Amen.