

I Read the News Today, Oh, Boy!
Sunday, March 20, 2022
Third Sunday in Lent
Sermon Text: Luke 13:1-9

You might not be able to tell it from my writing, but I was a Communication/Public Relations major in college, which meant I took several journalism classes. In one of my classes, we spent several weeks learning how to write a good headline. We all wanted to avoid ending up on Jay Leno's "Headlines" bit on the Tonight Show, with something ridiculous like "Mississippi's literacy program shows improvement", or "Federal agents raid gun shop, Find Weapons" or "Committee appoints committee to appoint committee." (I'm pretty sure this last one had something to do with church...). Leno ran these segments every week for 27 years, even collecting them into 5 published books. I think the reason the "Headlines" bit was so successful was because we all need a good laugh when it comes to the news. Finding that funny headline in the middle of all the terrible news that we see every day feels like such a breath of fresh air, a way to find some hope in the midst of so much despair. Jesus is confronted with the latest news headline floating around Israel in today's passage in Luke 13:1-9. Let's see how he responds:

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." 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.’”

We don’t have any historical sources outside of this passage in Luke about these Galileans who were killed by Pilate, so there’s isn’t a lot of detail we can get about the incident other than what Luke presents. Apparently, it involved people being killed by Pilate while they were making sacrifices at worship so that their blood and the blood of their animal sacrifices was spilled together. A shocking and horrifying incident to be sure, reminiscent of events in our times where places of worship are often attacked to create maximum terror and make a statement of fear. And apparently, the act was having its intended effect because it was the breaking headline of the day when Jesus heard of it.

And of course, when tragedy strikes, humans try to make sense of the event. Why did this happen? Who is responsible? We do this to try and find some sort of meaning in things that seem so random and capricious since tragedy often seems to strike with no rhyme or reason. Sometimes the blame turns upon the people who were harmed in the incident. What did *they* do to cause this? We’ve all heard talk like this when we hear of tragedy. “Maybe if they hadn’t been involved in X, then Y wouldn’t have happened” or “I guess they weren’t living right.”, etc. Often these connections we try to make are completely illogical, like “If he hadn’t been cheating on his taxes, he wouldn’t have gotten into that car wreck.” We’ll seek almost any explanation, even if it’s illogical or doesn’t reflect reality, just as long as it gives us *something* or *someone* to blame.

As believers, we of course want to find that meaning in God somehow. So, we ask different, but related questions like, “Why did God allow this to happen?”, or “If God is completely in control, doesn’t everything happen with his permission? And if it does, wouldn’t God protect those who are good and use tragedy to punish those who are ‘not living right’”? And “if I am living right, shouldn’t I be protected from these types of tragedy?”

When hearing about the tragedy of the Galileans, Jesus uses the conversation to correct his listeners (and our) understanding of the connection between tragedy and sin by stating that there is no direct connection. Sin can have negative consequences of course, but there is no one-to-one correlation. Jesus brings up what was apparently a recent accidental tragedy to continue to make this point. It doesn’t matter whether the tragedy is man-made or an accident, experiencing tragedy doesn’t make someone a greater sinner. There is no cause and effect. All humans have to suffer and face tragedy. The level of tragedy doesn’t equal the level of sinning. After all, Jesus, the sinless one, died one of the most tragic and undeserved deaths imaginable! Jesus pulls us back to what we see in reality; sometimes good people suffer and bad people are successful.

Jesus shifts the focus from who to blame for tragedy to the real issue: that we all are in need of repentance. Those who are living are just as much in need of repentance as those who were tragically killed. Surviving doesn’t mean that one is more virtuous than the one that does not. I think many of us attempt to flatten the meaning of the word “repent” down to just feeling guilty about something, telling God that we are sorry and just going on about our life changing nothing, or just changing our behavior that one time. The CEB bible captures the deeper meaning of “repent” when it translates “repent” as “change your hearts and lives.”

Repentance is not just about being sorry for immoral behavior, but about deeper change in our hearts and minds. It's about changing our thinking to a completely new way of thinking that is closer what God desires for us and our lives. It's the difference between something like not swearing at people because "that's not what proper nice people do" and not swearing at people because all people are made in God's image and treating them poorly even in our speech is not respecting the image of God in them. The first approach will lead to me not cussing people out in public just as much as the second one, but only the second approach would lead me to actually having the correct attitude of my mind and heart (and hopefully a reduction in swearing while getting cut off on I-35). Only the second would help us "adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

So, what does Jesus mean when he says that those who don't have this repentance will die like the victims of Pilate and the falling tower? Is Jesus saying that repentance can save us from bodily harm and death? I don't believe that is what Jesus is saying and I think that the parable of the fig tree in the second half of our passage today gives us some information to reach this conclusion. In the story of the fig tree, the whole reason that the gardener decides to save the tree is that it has *not* borne fruit. It is the tree out of which no goodness has been found and appears to be wasting good water and soil, at least to the owner of the tree, who is not there working on the tree like the gardener is. The gardener asks for one more year to work with the tree, to give it fertilizer and water in hopes that it will bear fruit. If we are looking at this parable as teaching us about bearing the fruit of repentance (from the context of the passage) then those who are *not repenting* are avoiding death! Which obviously, doesn't make

sense with what Jesus was saying previously about the need to repent. Thus, I think it makes more sense to think that Jesus is talking about spiritual death rather than physical death.

And the spiritual life we seek in order to avoid spiritual death is about purpose. Those who brought Jesus the news of Pilate's slaughter were looking for the meaning and purpose of what appears to be such a senseless death. Those who died in the tower collapse also seemed to die in an arbitrary way with no purpose. Jesus is saying that by embracing true repentance, we avoid living a life that is purposeless. We will bear fruit and when we face death as all of us do, we will have lived a life of purpose. We will have not died spiritually before we die physically.

And this is the gift of grace of the gardener, God, who gives us grace to grow and an appointed time for us to repent, to work on our lives and mold them more closely to our example, Jesus, that we might be a tree that bears good fruit into the world. When we stop focusing on who is to blame for the problems of our families, churches, communities and countries and start getting to the work of true repentance, we radically change ourselves and radically change our world. So, this Lent, may we recognize this gift of time for the grace that it is, repent, and change the world. Amen.