

Luke 13:1-9

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.’”

As Jesus moves toward Jerusalem, Pilate, and the cross, he is asked why bad things happen. Is it God’s punishment? The people have linked tragedy and disaster with God’s will. And we add to their question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” This is the question that many people ask in various ways. Quite often, it takes the form of “Why did this happen to her?” or “What did I do to deserve this? Did I deserve this?” This is especially true when the suffering is our own or that of someone we know and love. Or we may ask why there is so much unjust suffering in the world.

They confronted Jesus with this question. And they were not alone. Even the disciples asked when Jesus encountered a man who was blind. “Whose fault was this?” And Jesus answered that it was not due to sin, his or his parents.

Why, then, do tragedies occur?

We are aware of the inappropriate responses to this question, as well-meaning people are at a loss for what to say and try to come up with some words of comfort. Answers

like, “God needed another angel for the heavenly choir,” or a natural disaster is blamed on the victims.

When often, there are no words, but our presence in the case of personal losses — even a simple “I’m sorry” speaks volumes. And it is better than a host of words that do not heal. People may never remember our words, but they will remember we were there. Instead of blaming the victims, we should find ways to help them.

Typically, these “why” questions arise during times of tragedy. We are fortunate that today we can take a moment to reflect on why.

Folks asked Jesus about an atrocity committed by Pontius Pilate. It was quite a gruesome slaughter followed by an abomination beyond imagination as Pilate mingled the blood of his slaughtered victims with the blood of animals sacrificed to God. Jesus said to them, “No, there was no great sin committed by these people, but beware, you too will perish if you don’t repent.”

Then Jesus adds another tragedy to the equation, talking about a tower falling on some people and crushing them. They, too, were no worse sinners than anyone else, but the same awaits you if you don’t repent.

Notice that Jesus didn’t answer the question of why. I wish he would have. However, there may not be a satisfactory answer this side of heaven. In the case of the Tower's collapse, we don’t know why. In Pilate's case, part of the reason is that Pilate was a selfish, ruthless, and evil tyrant. He did what he wanted and was a law unto himself. Eventually, the Romans recalled him because his egocentric atrocities and brutality became too much. His sin caused this atrocity and the wanton crucifixion of Jesus. But the people who suffered and died were not to blame. While he doesn’t answer, he uses the occasion to speak to one of the major themes of his ministry: the need for us to repent, to change our hearts, minds, and lives, and to turn around and return to God.

So, when natural disasters strike, when human atrocities strike, “Why?” is our natural response. From school shootings to tragic wildfires, people want to know why. And perhaps, who’s to blame? We want explanations and certainty when there are none.

Unfortunately, someone will always come up with a reason to blame the victims or deny the tragedy. I know I have fallen victim to this myself, like blaming the victims of the Los Angeles fires for living in dangerous areas. Or we might even blame ourselves.

I wish Jesus had fully answered the question, “Why?” Then, folks wouldn’t fall victim to blaming themselves or others when bad things happen. However, it is natural to do so, as we strive to make sense of things that make no sense at all. Why, Jesus, why? But Jesus didn’t answer the question of why. He used those tragedies as a wake-up call. He said, “Don’t focus on other people's tragedies and disasters. Focus on your need to repent.”

Now, this doesn’t mean that our behavior or the behavior of others cannot lead to unfortunate consequences. If we don’t change the oil, it can prove quite costly. What we do or fail to do can have disastrous consequences. Drunken driving results in a deadly car crash. The lax enforcement of gun control laws or cases of corrupt pollution skirting the law can have disastrous results for people. You get the point. Sometimes, the chickens come home to roost, not only on a personal level, but also on a social level.

Of course, every wrong step we take does not end in such horrendous tragedies, but sometimes it does. Sometimes, it is our actions, or perhaps those of someone else, that bring about these results. Or, in some cases, evil happens, tragedy strikes, and we don’t know why, and Jesus didn’t tell us why despite the fact that we want an answer. However, these events are not a result of an uncaring or vindictive punishment from God. God doesn’t cause or delight in them. In the final analysis, God’s chief attributes are love and mercy, not punishment or even fairness. God’s grace trumps God’s judgment. God does not treat us as we might deserve when we do wrong. God seeks to love us into changing. Even God’s mercy is a call to repent.

However, as unpleasant as it may be, God does judge us and calls us to repent. When we do wrong, Jesus holds us accountable. God doesn’t overlook our actions and inaction. But his love is so great that he will not abandon us but will stick with us, continually calling us to change our hearts and lives, and the sooner, the better. It is

like a loving parent who will not overlook our bad behavior, but even though calling us to take responsibility, change, and make amends does not stop loving us.

People didn't get this in Jesus' day and they don't in ours.

For a long time, the religious leaders of Biblical Israel taught that there was a direct correspondence between behavior and reward and/or punishment from God. Things balanced out. Good rewarded—Evil punished.

But then people began to say, "Wait a minute; this doesn't feel like the God whose steadfast love endures forever." Good people often suffer greatly and without apparent reason. If not God, who is to blame? We need to have a reason for suffering. One attempt to understand this is the Book of Job. You may know the story.

In the story, Satan is not yet identical to the evil one but rather plays the role of the tester. At a later date, the name Satan becomes the theological embodiment of evil that seeks to thwart God's will. In this story, God says to Satan, "Observe my faithful servant, Job." And Satan says, "Of course, he is devout; look how you've blessed him. Why wouldn't he honor you?"

But take away his blessings and protection, and let bad things come his way; then see how faithful he is. God says, "Okay" (remember, this is a parable or story), and Job loses his wealth, his health, and his children. All the while, he insists he has done no wrong. His wife even turns on him with the classic line "Curse God and die."

Then Job's friends come to comfort him and sit with him in silence for a week, letting him know they care. But then they begin to speak, and this is where they go wrong. The best thing they could have done is sit and offer their love and support.

However, they insist that he must have done something to deserve this, for God would not punish him unjustly. Examine yourself and "man up," admit it. But Job maintains his innocence as they repeatedly challenge him. Job again denies he has done wrong. He goes so far as to demand God answer him and tell him what he did wrong.

Finally, God shows up and confronts Job. And God says, “If you will tell me where you were when I created the heavens and the earth, I will answer you.” Job can’t answer.

God doesn’t answer Job, either. Job is overwhelmed, essentially saying, “I have asked things beyond my ability to understand.”

It is not clear whether Job is satisfied with the experience of God’s presence and God’s non-answer or gives in. Did the experience of God prove enough, or did God overpower Job? To me, the story is open-ended and intended to prompt reflection and thought on the issue of the source of good and evil. Like Jesus, the story doesn’t give us an answer.

After rebuking Job’s friends, saying that they don’t know what they are talking about, God restores all of Job’s losses so that he has more than he had before. Though this feels like a happily ever after ending, we are still left with the fact that in the story, Job lost his children. So, the ending doesn’t resolve everything. All we have is that there is evil, and our sin does not always cause it.

However, this wisdom story effectively challenged the notion that God grants health, wealth, and a good life to the righteous and afflicts the disobedient with poverty, illness, and disaster. The simple equation of blessings for the good and curses for the wicked was undone, and as Jesus puts it, God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45)

The writer of Job uses the story to undermine the one-to-one correspondence between behavior and blessing or curse, prompting us to reflect on the question of “why.”

Jesus also uses the question “why” to call us to reflect not on why but on the need for repentance and the changing of our hearts and lives. Note Jesus doesn’t say that God never intervenes. He doesn’t answer the question of why people suffer.

Jesus uses the “why” question as a call to repentance. A call to wake up.

And then Jesus tells his own story, a parable about a barren fig tree. He talks about a fig tree that has not borne fruit—a metaphor for folks who have not produced good deeds and live a life pleasing to God. Now, the owner of the tree wants to cut it down. But Jesus tells us that God is a God of second chances. The gardener, who represents God, says, “Let me fertilize and tend it one more year. Let's give it another chance. One more chance, a second chance. Then, if it doesn't bear fruit, you can cut it down.”

God lavishes love, grace, and forgiveness on us to enable us to repent. God is giving us another chance.

But as the commercials say, this offer won't last forever, and don't assume just because we have not suffered a severe tragedy recently that we are bearing fruit. But the story is not meant to terrify us. Instead, it calls us to change our hearts and lives and to begin seeing things from a new perspective. Jesus is saying that God's patience and mercy are available and being poured out on us in love.

This is to let us know that the need for repentance is urgent. Don't wait till there is a tragedy. Sometimes, that may be too late. Please take advantage of God's mercy now. Notice Jesus leaves the story open-ended, like so many of his best stories, to allow us to reflect on our need to repent.

This story calls us to change our hearts and lives now.

During this season of Lent, we have the opportunity to reflect on our need for repentance and to make changes in our hearts, minds, and lives as we take advantage of God's loving care.