

Luke 13:1-9

¹At 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.'"

Some of Jesus' followers apparently had the same questions that we have all been hearing for the past month or so. There have been earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and Taiwan, along with various storms, floods, and mudslides and thousands of people have died. Thousands more are in misery. So, we hear the question: Why do disasters come to some people and others stay safe? (We may even ask those questions ourselves.) We grieve the loss of life and do what we can to help relieve the suffering – but we wonder why it happened.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, people tell Jesus about a terrible political persecution in which Pilate had people killed. They wanted their teacher to make some sense out of the tragedy. Jesus firmly rejected the idea that the suffering and death of those

people happened because of their sins, but he did not offer any other explanation. Instead of tying up the tragedy in a neat, understandable package, Jesus added to the confusion. He said, “That was awful, and what’s more, there was a terrible tower collapse over in Siloam. That killed eighteen people.”

Please note: Jesus did not try to explain the suffering – and fail. He acknowledged that the suffering was beyond our understanding and beyond our control. Instead, Jesus turned our attention to what we can understand and control – ourselves. That was probably a jolt for Jesus’ listeners. They were giving him a chance to shake his head and wonder what the world is coming to, which is the time-honored response to disaster. Instead, Jesus called his listeners to a more personal issue – their own lives. He said, “Those Galileans were not worse sinners than other Galileans; that is not why they suffered.” But he does not go on to say why they *did* suffer. He says, “But unless *you* repent, you will all perish as they did.” That was changing the subject. They were having a comfortable moment of outrage about political malfeasance and Jesus started talking about personal responsibility. He added his own story about a tower accident with multiple fatalities – with the same disconcerting conclusion, **people should look to themselves and focus their lives on what they believe to be the most important things they can do. It turns out that our lives will not last forever.**

Jesus uses the word, “Repent”. “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Jesus was not saying, “Act right or a tower will fall on you.” He was saying, “Those people are dead and they can no longer focus their lives on serving God. If you do not focus your life on serving God, you join your partners in tragedy. It may be because of physical death or it may be because of a refusal to choose God, but the results are the same. You will not be living your life in God’s service.”

“Repenting” means changing, turning around. Jesus uses it to call his listeners to turn away from a life that ignores God and to look to God for purpose and direction. Repentance is imperative. It is not just a handy strategy to deal with guilt. It is the ability to focus our lives and live according to our values. Jesus does not say, “Unless you repent you will be unhappy.” He does not say, “Unless you repent things will not go well for you.” He says, “Unless you repent you will all perish.” The victims of Pilate’s political persecution will not live according to their priorities because they are dead. If you do not live according to your priorities – even if you are still breathing – the results are the same.

There are many people who feel they really have nothing to repent of. They pay lip service to being sinful, but are more anxious to compare their sins to someone else’s than to consider the need for personal change. For such people, a basic acquaintance with their own behavior would be a good place to start. But even when people have gotten past that – repentance is more than a recitation of our sins and shortcomings. It is more than a sense of sadness or an acknowledgement of guilt. It is a radical reorientation of our lives that places God at the center of our lives. Frederick Buechner wrote, “True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ than it looks to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’”

Repentance is for us – the good Christian people who try to live decent lives. We are here in church this morning, and we are all friendly, and we will let each other go ahead of us in line to get coffee. We believe firmly in the Golden Rule and we like each other. And it would be nice if Jesus would tell us that all of those good qualities will keep a tower from falling on us.

That is not his message. Jesus’ message is for us to examine ourselves and see if our lives are ordered by God’s will.

Jesus did not intend to scare his audience. The point is, they were already scared. They had been reminded that life is fragile. We often have those same reminders. We never

have to wait too long to hear about natural disasters in the news. Our nation has been at war for so long that, more often than not, we forget about it. Our economy won't go and our cars won't stop. And we would like for Jesus to say that we can be safe if we act right.

Jesus loves us too much to give us false hope in a shallow promise. He looks at these lives that he loves, that have been created by God for profound things, and he says, "Use these lives as God intended. There is no difference between you and Pilate's murder victims, except that you will wake up tomorrow – probably. They do not have their lives anymore and you do. What will you do with them?"

Sorrow and shame over our sinful selves may be entirely justified, but it does not have much to do with how we will live the rest of our lives. Jesus Christ has defeated death and he calls to us from the other side of the grave. He calls us forward into the future. Get a clear look at eternity and repent yourself toward it. Jesus says repentance is our only hope to avoid perishing. That is not a promise to keep us out from under falling towers. It is a promise for a life worth living. A life that begins now and continues through eternity.