

“Suffering & Tragedy, Sin and Repentance”

Luke 13:1-9

Rev. Michael Poulos

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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine

This morning we continue our series on the Gospel of Luke, turning to a short passage at the beginning of chapter 13. Last week when we focused on the Parable of the Good or Compassionate Samaritan, I confessed I was not excited about preaching on such a well-known story, perhaps one of the most beloved in all of the New Testament. “What could I say that has not been said before?” or so I thought. Well, when it comes to the Word of God, and the weekly selections you find in the Narrative Lectionary, you better watch out for what you wish for! This Sunday’s passage includes a couple of stories and a parable that are much less known, and much less preached about. As Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem - the place where he will face arrest, suffering, persecution and finally death - there’s a sense of urgency growing in his ministry. He continues to heal people and to teach them about the coming reign of God, but he does so with increasing urgency. In the preceding chapter, chapter 12, he tells his closest followers, “Be dressed and ready for service and keep your lamps lit!” (12.35). Jesus knows his final hour is approaching, and he can’t hide his anxiety about it. “I have a baptism I must experience. And how distressed am I until it’s completed!” (12.50) He urges his disciples to interpret the time that they are entering (12.54-56). Make no mistake about it, it's time to repent - a word that means to literally change your way of thinking. Echoing the message of John the Baptist we heard all the way back in chapter 3, it's the time to bear good fruit, fruit worthy of repentance (3.8), the fruit of hearing and doing God’s will, of putting God’s love and justice into practice in the soil of our lives. This theme of repentance will be our focus this morning, and it's a theme that takes center stage during this season of Lent.

I invite you to turn to the passage found in your bulletin insert and to read the parts that are in bold. Let us listen now to God’s Word:

Luke 13:1-9 *Common English Bible*

Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. He replied, “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? **No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.** What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else

who lives in Jerusalem? **No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.**” Jesus told this parable:

“A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’

The gardener responded, **‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’**”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This week I got word that a 19 year-old young man and his girlfriend were involved in a serious car accident somewhere on the parkway. I have known his mother and the family for many years, and I was shocked to hear that both her son and the girlfriend were hospitalized with serious injuries, one taken to Johnson City, the other to Asheville. Such accidents happen routinely, and since Helene the number of accidents on our highways has only increased. I do not know the details of this accident, but I do know the families involved are in need of prayers and support. In Thursday’s reflection in our Lenten study devotion on *Grieving Change and Loss*, one of the authors reflects on the death of Joan Didion’s husband back in 2004. “Didion’s husband died at the table where they’d just sat down for an ordinary evening meal” (Day 9: Thursday, Help for Our Unbelief). Those who experience tragedy often remark on how ordinary the day seems when tragedy comes. This is what Didion learned in her interviews with some of those who witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor - many remarked that it was just “an ordinary Sunday morning” when the Japanese bombs fell and killed so many.

How we make sense of tragedy and the suffering that comes along with it is a question that we all wrestle with. It is a question that is not new, and it is a question that runs throughout the Bible. The Book of Job may be the most well known example in the Bible - when the righteous and God-fearing man named Job loses everything (his possessions, his health, his family), his friends come by to bring him comfort and they also try to explain to him that his suffering is due to his sin. No matter how much they try to explain it to him, Job refuses to give in to their explanations, and Job refuses to give up on his faith in God. You see, one of the ways humans have tried to make sense of suffering is to adopt the assumptions of Job’s friends - that sin and moral failure leads to tragedy and punishment. If you do bad things, then you will reap what you sow. You will get what is coming to you. This way

of explaining suffering is still alive today, whether we are conscious of our assumptions or not. If you live right, you will be blessed, and if you don't then you won't!

At the beginning of today's passage that is what is going on... people come to Jesus reminding him about recent tragic events. First of all, a number of Galileans were killed by the Roman Governor Pilate while the people were offering their animal sacrifices in the Temple. These faithful and devout pilgrims traveled all the way to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices to God, and for some reason Pilate had them killed! (Other translations describe this more graphically, that Pilate had their blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.) Now, will Jesus agree that these Galileans deserved to suffer this way? Were they more sinful than other Galileans who did not die this way? Jesus clearly says "No!" - they were not more sinful than the others, and he even doubles down on this by bringing up another tragic event, when eighteen people were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them. So-called natural disasters occur all the time, and once again Jesus rejects the formula that correlates sin with bad things happening to people. This is consistent with what we read in John chapter 9. When Jesus' disciples walk by a person who was born blind, they ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned that this man was born blind? Was it him or was it his parents?" (John 9:1-3). Again, Jesus says no - he doesn't buy into the simplistic formula that rationalizes bad things to be a result of sinfulness.

I don't know about you, but I like this response of Jesus - I like that he seems to be ahead of his time, that he is smart enough to reject this common understanding of suffering. And I wish we could just stop here and give Jesus a proverbially high five, agree that suffering is a mystery and is not punishment for sin, and just call it a day. But I'm afraid we cannot do that! If you pay attention to today's passage, Jesus is up to something more than just debunking the myth that sin causes suffering. What Jesus is up to is something much more important and much more radical than that. To the people worrying about the sins of the Galileans killed by Pilate or the 18 who were crushed by a falling tower, Jesus says, "Don't be worrying about their sins! That's not where you need to pay attention. Instead, you should be focused on your own need for repentance, and the reality that you, too, are living in sin. *"No, I tell you, but unless you repent - unless you change your hearts and lives - you will die just as they did!"* Jesus repeats this twice, sending a clear message that instead of worrying about other people's business, we need to take an honest moral inventory of our own life. It's tempting for those of us who have not suffered tragedy to think we are somehow more "blessed" than others, that we must have God on our side because things are relatively "smooth sailing."

Yesterday when we were packing meals with [Rise Against Hunger](#), preparing food to go to places like Haiti or Malawi, I realized I have grown up believing God somehow has blessed us Americans more than others, and that somehow my privilege is a sign of being right with God. But that simply is not true and that is not the message we get throughout the scriptures. Time and time again, the message is that all of us are held captive to the power of sin - that we all have fallen short, that we all need to do a u-turn, to repent - to change our hearts and our lives. The good news that Jesus brings is that God's reign has arrived, here on earth as it already is in heaven. The good news is that God's Spirit of love and forgiveness, the Spirit of freedom and abundance - this new order where the values of the world are turned upside down - this good news is calling for us to make a response. John the Baptist called the response the fruit of repentance. "Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives!" (3.8)

It's not enough to say you have loyalty to the church or to God, but you have to actually put that loyalty into practice - to love God through loving your neighbor in real ways. And as we saw in the example of the Good Samaritan story last week, to love your neighbor means you are willing to act in risky and self-giving ways, ways that seem foolish in the eyes of the world. *Why take a risk and help someone on a dangerous highway? Why spend your life serving others when you could make much more money looking out for yourself? Why give a stranger a meal when you don't know their whole story? Why adopt a child when you have so much on your plate already?* Such risky acts of love is the way of Jesus, as his face is set to go to Jerusalem. The question for the disciples (and yes, that includes you and me!) is how are we going to respond?

And this brings us to the closing parable of the fig tree, a parable not as famous as the Good Samaritan or others in Luke, but one just as important. The owner of the fig tree has been looking for fruit on his tree for three years, and still there is nothing. So he takes a sheet out of John the Baptist's playbook, declaring to his gardener, "I've come looking for fruit for the past 3 years and I've found nothing. It's time for you to cut it down! This fruitless tree is even depleting the soil of its nutrients - it's actually doing more harm than good! So yes, it needs to be cut down!" But an amazing act of grace happens. The gardener pleads for more time, and even promises to do more gardening. *"Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down."* And as we have seen before, Luke leaves the story open-ended. We are not told what will happen, but what we do know is that we are certainly being invited to make a response. Now is the time for us to repent and to live fruitful lives! Are we going to bear fruit and make the most of the advocacy the gardener is exercising on our behalf, or are we going to take a chance and do nothing?

So on this second Sunday of Lent, I believe the invitation is ours, both individually as well as a congregation. What does repentance look like for you? And what does it

look like for us together as a community of disciples? Remember, repentance is much more than saying we are sorry for our sins - repentance has to do with changing our whole way of thinking, changing our mindset to align more with God's way of being and doing. And according to Jesus, repentance is not something we do with our mouths but it has to do with our lives - the fruit of repentance is how we live out a Gospel mindset - it's leaning more into abundance and less into scarcity. It's living more out of love and less out of fear. It's living in ways that move us towards the outsider and the stranger and less to hanging out with those just like us. In the coming months ahead as we open up our church building, hosting groups from around the country who come to provide assistance with their hearts and their hands, I pray that our church will bear much fruit. Thanks be to God who has planted us in this time and this place, the very One who cares and nurtures us by the waters of mercy and grace. Amen.