



Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Minister of Music: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107 Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

Putting Tragedy In Perspective

Luke 13:1-9

March 11, 2007

The Random House College Dictionary defines a “tragedy” as “a lamentable, dreadful, or fatal event; a calamity; a disaster.” Nearly every week, the news media focuses our attention on some tragic event happening somewhere around the globe! Who can forget the trauma of Sept. 11, 2001, when roughly 3,000 people died in 3 terrorist attacks? Our nation has felt vulnerable ever since! On Dec. 26, 2004, we were horrified to learn of the tsunami in Asia that claimed roughly 273,000 lives. On Feb. 12th of this year, we were shocked to hear that an 18-year-old boy killed 5 strangers and wounded 4 more at a shopping mall in Utah, before the police killed HIM. And every night, “The news Hour” on PBS gives an update on the number of U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. That figure now stands at 3,100+ .

Inevitably, following such tragedies, people begin to ask, “WHY?!” In particular, family and friends of the victims struggle to figure out, “Why HER, she was such a GOOD person?!”

“Why HIM, he had so much to live for?!” “Why THEM, they were so much in love, and did so much for their church and their community?!” And those who survive such close calls with death are often plagued by GUILT and GRIEF. “Why was I spared?”, they wonder. “Why couldn’t I have died in place of my wife, my child, my mother, my friend?!” We seem to feel that life ought to be FAIR and PREDICTABLE, so we try to figure out WHY: was it an accident caused by human error; a deliberate, evil deed; or a problem caused by mechanical failure? And once we sort out WHY, we then try to affix BLAME for such tragedies. Were the victims to blame for their own fate? Was another human being negligent or deliberate? Am I to blame because I ought to have foreseen this tragedy and done something to prevent it? And somewhere along the line, we may ask why GOD allows such calamities to happen! Or we may even decide that GOD IS TO BLAME for inflicting suffering on us and the people we love!

Our Scripture Lesson mentions two tragedies that had apparently made the front page of the *Jerusalem Gazette*. People back then were familiar with these events, but we must piece together the details. From sources outside the Bible, we DO KNOW that Pontius Pilate authorized the construction of a new water system for Jerusalem. In order

to pay for the new aqueduct, the Governor took money from the Temple Treasury. The wealthy citizens of the capital accepted this SECULAR use of RELIGIOUS funds, but out in the countryside, the Galileans objected vigorously, and organized a protest in the Temple. Pilate knew of the plot, and ordered his soldiers to infiltrate the crowd, wearing civilian clothes over their uniforms. The troops were supposed to minimize violence through the element of surprise. But during the ensuing riot, things got out of hand, and many Galileans were killed. SOME PEOPLE in Jerusalem may have felt that these Galileans got what they deserved, since those country bumpkins had a reputation for causing trouble with Rome!

It may well be that the other tragedy mentioned in our text was connected with the same public-works project. "Siloam" mentioned in verse 4 is very close to the Greek word "shiloah", which means "aqueduct." In Jerusalem, there was a large pool of water that was fed by an aqueduct that began at the spring of Gihon. John ch. 9 mentions this pool of water, or reservoir, where sick people came for healing. In any case, it appears that workmen were building a new section of this aqueduct when a tower fell and killed 18 of them. Because they were paid with money taken from the Temple, SOME PEOPLE may have felt that the Almighty had punished the workmen for stealing from the house of God! Again, the self-righteous people who followed Jesus seemed to feel that these workers were SINNERS WHO GOT WHAT THEY DESERVED!

Underlying such a belief was the "health and wealth Gospel" found in some Old Testament passages. These passages suggest that, IF you are righteous, God will BLESS you with prosperity, many children, and a long life. But if you are EVIL, God will automatically punish you with poverty, infertility, and an early death. There are, however, countless stories in the Bible that challenge this simplistic notion that wealth and old age ALWAYS imply God's BLESSING, while illness and poverty inevitably imply SIN! Abraham, for ex., was a RIGHTEOUS man, yet he was CHILDLESS most of his life! God declared Job to be RIGHTEOUS, yet the Lord allowed SATAN to take away Job's wealth, his children, and his health! Both of these men were RIGHTEOUS, not because they were SINLESS, but because they trusted God— they had FAITH that God would save them! But Jesus was SINLESS, yet even HE died in poverty, without children, cut down in the prime of life! Those who had eyes to see and ears to hear should have known that it's wrong to equate suffering with PUNISHMENT and a life of ease with BLESSING!

In our Scripture Lesson, Jesus rejected the idea that a loving God singles out some people for tragedy. Jesus states that ALL GALILEANS are SINNERS, and the ones who died were no worse than the ones who escaped death at the hands of Pilate's soldiers. He asserts that ALL citizens of Jerusalem are SINNERS, and the 18 who died were no worse than those who escaped the accident. Jesus attacked the notion again when he healed the blind man at the pool of Siloam mentioned in John ch.9. Because that unfortunate man who BORN blind, the Pharisees assumed that HIS PARENTS must have sinned, since babies are INNOCENT at the time of their birth! But Christ said, "NEITHER this man NOR his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's WORKS might be revealed IN HIM!" In other words, illness should not be viewed as

PUNISHMENT for SIN, but as an opportunity for God to show divine love and power by offering healing and forgiveness! In like manner, Jesus offered friendship to Zaccheus, the crooked tax collector; acceptance to the Samaritan woman he met at the well, who was cohabiting with a man out of wedlock; and Jesus refused to condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery!

In our text, our Savior emphasized the primacy of God's mercy by telling a parable about a fig tree that failed to live up to its potential. In Palestine, fruit trees are often planted among grape vines in a vineyard. In Lev. 19:23f, the Law of Moses states that once a tree bears fruit, the figs must be left on the tree for the first 3 years of its productivity. You see, if fruit is taken off a young tree, it will send all of its energy into the production of more figs, and it won't develop sufficient roots and branches. The Law of Moses adds that in the 4th year, the figs may be harvested, but offered to God as a praise offering. In his parable, Jesus says that a tree had produced NO FRUIT for 3 years, and was thus taking up valuable space in the vineyard, and the owner had every right to cut the tree down. But the gardener, who had tended this tree for several years, pleaded to give the tree one more year, the 4th year, the year when the fruit would normally

be dedicated to God. The tree did not need the AXE; it deserved some tender, loving care! If, after 4 years, the tree still did not bear fruit, then the owner may cut it down and plant another!

Clearly, Jesus meant this parable as a warning to the Pharisees of his day. If they did not repent quickly and begin to bear the FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, God would "cut them down", so to speak, and cast them off as religious leaders. But the emphasis in this parable is NOT on God's proper judgment, but rather, upon God's MERCY! God sought to give Israel's leaders a little more time to accept Jesus as God's Son and their Savior! So, in our text, Jesus twice tells his audience, "Unless YOU repent, you will all perish as they did!" Through the Scriptures, Christ is saying the same thing to you and me today! 2 Pet. 3:9 tells us that the Second Coming of Christ, also called the Judgment Day, is being delayed only because God "is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance!"

So, what can we learn from today's lesson? 1st of all, we can learn humility. When we see someone who is suffering, we must never GLOAT over their misfortune, or jump to the conclusion that God is punishing THEM, but rewarding US for being GOOD! The story of John Wesley provides an example of humility. You may recall that the Rev. Wesley was a great evangelist and the founder of the Methodist denomination. He was once preaching in the streets of London when some jailers passed by, escorting a prisoner to the gallows. The audience expected the preacher to use the criminal as a warning of the dire consequences of sin. Instead, Wesley pointed at the condemned man and shouted, "THERE, BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD, GO II!" John Wesley understood that what sinners need isn't CRITICISM, but rather, TENDER, LOVING CARE, like the fig tree in today's parable!

2ndly, we must remember that pain, sickness, and death are SATAN'S work;

GOD desires healing, joy, and life for each of us! John 3:17 declares, "God did not send the Son into the world to CONDEMN the world, but to SAVE the world through him." In John ch.11, Jesus defined the Kingdom of God in these terms: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." In Luke Ch. 13, Jesus healed a woman who had been crippled, asking, "Should this woman, WHOM SATAN HAS KEPT BOUND FOR 18 LONG YEARS, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" Among other gifts, Christ has promised us PEACE, JOY, and ABUNDANT LIFE! Rom.6:23 states, THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH, BUT THE FREE GIFT OF GOD IS ETERNAL LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD." That verse again reminds us to be HUMBLE– and GRATEFUL, for God does not give any of us what we deserve! Pain and death are very real, but God has offered us HOPE through faith in our Savior!

3rdly, the Scripture Lesson joins other New Testament passages in warning us to BE PREPARED for the Day of Judgment. Several of our Lord's parables bid us to WATCH and to STAY AWAKE because we don't know when Jesus might return to earth! Nor do we know when illness, or an accident, or a random act of violence might usher us into the presence of God! But I must say again that the emphasis is NOT upon future doom and gloom, but rather, on the present reality of God's LOVE!! Jesus said of Zaccheus, the crooked tax collector, "TODAY salvation has come to this house, for the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." To the repentant thief who died on a cross next to him, Jesus said, "TODAY you will be with me in paradise." 2 Cor.6:2 declares, "NOW is the time of God's favor, NOW is the day of salvation." God is not threatening you with DEATH; God is offering you ETERNAL LIFE! HAVE YOU SAID "YES" to JESUS?! Amen!