

## **For a Life of Fruitfulness** **Luke 13:1-9**

### **When the Sky Is Falling...**

Let me show you a picture. [ppt] Do you know what this picture is? It is the Great Lisbon earthquake, showing Lisbon in flames and a tsunami overwhelming the ships in the harbor. The great earthquake hit this city in 1755. It was November 1st which is..., All Saint's Day! On this holy morning, most of the people in Lisbon were in church. In the mid-eighteenth century, Lisbon was one of the most religious and pious cities in Europe. There were about 250,000 residents in the city and one out of every ten citizens was a priest, a monk or a nun.<sup>1</sup> But on this holy day, suddenly an unexpected natural disaster hit and demolished the holy city. Churches, homes and government buildings collapsed killing thousands of people instantly with many more bleeding and wounded. People cried, "Mercy dear God. Mercy!" But there was no mercy. Fires started by fallen candles consumed the city and to escape the destruction of the earthquake and fires people ran to the harbor, the only safe place left. However, minutes later, a huge tsunami headed toward them and thousands were drowned. This dreadful earthquake and tsunami completely destroyed this holy city and killed about 1/5 of the entire population on that day. It was a tragic day.

When faced with tragedies that seem absolutely indiscriminate in their nature and unbelievable in their scale, we cannot stop asking, "why?" When bad things happen to people, especially, seemingly good and pious people, we ponder "what can we do? What is God doing in the midst of people's suffering? why is this happening? Why? Why?" News headlines today keep reminding us that bad things continue to happen in the world and tragedy is everywhere. We have to struggle with questions, many, many questions.

### **Facing Tragedy**

In today's scripture, we hear the headlines of Jesus' time. Two tragedies had recently happened in Jerusalem. We don't know exactly what happened, but the tower of Siloam fell. Whether it fell through shoddy construction or old age, we don't know, but one day the tower fell. When the rubble and the debris were removed, they found eighteen bodies. Facing this unexpected natural disaster, people questioned, "why?"

The other tragedy was man-made and horrendous. As we all know, Israel in Jesus' time was under the rule of the Roman empire. Pontius Pilate was the Governor of Judaea, appointed by the Roman Emperor, Tiberius. We don't know why, but one day, Pontius Pilate killed the pilgrims from Galilee in the courtyards of the temple and mingled their blood with that of the animal sacrifices. This violent and abominable act of evil not only cost people's lives, but it also immediately profaned all the worship and made the temple unclean for certain days. We don't exactly know what triggered this tragedy, however, this kind of violence was a regular imperial practice to show the power of the Roman Empire over the conquered people, to terrify them and to make them submit to Roman rule.

A recent equivalent to this event is the Russian army bombing churches where refugees are taking shelter during the Ukraine war. In their indiscriminate attacks, the Russian army is attempting to show their power to the Ukrainians and terrify them into surrender. Like this, Pilate wanted to show the might of the Roman empire to the Jews by frequently spoiling their religious

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<sup>1</sup> What shall we say? Thomas G. Long, 2.

festivals and feast days. What Pilate did was a violent act of evil which humiliated and disturbed all Israelites. People had questions. “What can we do? Why these?”

Zealots, freedom fighters, were furious and argued, “we have to organize a civil uprising against Pilate immediately and seek our independence!” But the Sadducees, religious leaders and a pro-roman group, were concerned that the confrontational approach would only make the situation worse, so they argued, “Be more realistic and practical. We cannot defeat the Roman army. We don’t want to make this situation worse or have our holy city ruined. We should take a more balanced approach!” The Zealots might have wanted Jesus to come out for their revolutionary agenda. The Sadducees might have hoped that this famous prophet would be more realistic and calm the people’s anger down.

### **Stranger Answers**

Some people may have just wanted to know why this thing happened to them. Facing tragedies, people have questions and so do we. “why these? Why these victims? What did they do?” Like us, they bring those questions to Jesus and expect Jesus to give them some clear answers to their questions. “Jesus, why these?” they asked. And unlike many pastors, Jesus didn’t give an answer.

When we face tragedies, many faithful Christians try to explain the unexplainable by saying “the will of God.” When Covid-19 started to spread in China, some pastors preached that God was punishing communist China. When it reached the United States, some pastors preached that God was punishing sexual immorality of Americans through a deadly virus. But Jesus didn’t say “the will of God.” Jesus refused to engage in political finger-pointing and name-calling. He didn’t call Pilate “Axis of Evil” and he didn’t call for a military insurrection or political rally against Pilate. What did he say?

Jesus said, “unless you repent, you will all perish!” What a strange answer! People might have said, “No...no...no... Jesus, you must have misunderstood our questions. We are the victims here. Pilate killed our people and defiled our holy temple. We didn’t do anything. We are not guilty. What do you mean ‘repent?’ and for what?” What do we need to repent for today?

When we face a man-made crisis like the Ukraine war, we tend to take a side and make two groups. The good ones and the bad ones and we’re always on the good side, feeling morally superior. I have no doubt about the moral excellence of American people when faced with crises. Out of good will, we volunteer to help those in need. We donate money to support Ukrainian refugees. We support military aid and humanitarian aid while carefully taking a balanced approach so as not to escalate the war into another world war. We blame the unjust Russian invasion. We blame them for using cluster bombs and white phosphorus bombs that are banned by general international laws. We blame them for civilian casualties and war crimes. In this social atmosphere, we can be unwittingly trapped in a moral illusion, believing we are always right and those who disagree with us are wrong. As the situation worsens, we demonize the enemy who becomes somehow less human and more deserving of death. There is no peace. The feeling of moral superiority makes us feel good but it blinds us to see who we really are.

In responding to the 9/11 attack, the United States invaded Iraq based on claims that Iraq supported al-Qaeda and had weapons of mass destruction that posed a threat to the United States and its allies. During the war, the U.S army used cluster bombs and white phosphorus bombs. An estimated two hundred thousand to a million Iraqis died in the first five years of conflict and more than 3.3 million people had to leave their homes due to the war. In 2004, the 9/11

Commission concluded that there was no evidence of any relationship between Saddam's regime and al-Qaeda and no stockpiles of WMDs.

I am not saying that what Russia is doing is o.k. or that we are all just pieces of shit. That's not my intention. What I would like to say is that we must wake up from our illusion of moral superiority over others. Better or worse, we all are sinners and we all need to repent.

### **Repentance is not about feeling guilty but about living**

Repentance is not a feeling of remorse or guilt. It's not about self-deprecation. Rather repentance is waking up from the illusion of moral superiority over others and acknowledging that we all need God's grace. It is the acceptance of God's grace and an effort to live a life of fruitfulness. That's what the parable of the fig tree is about.

There was a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard. It had grown enough to bear fruit so he went out with his gardener but there was no fruit. He told the gardener to cut it down since it bore no fruit. And the gardener said, "sir, please let me dig around the tree and fertilize it. And then, after a year, if there's no fruit, we'll cut it down." And the owner said, "OK." This means that grace, the patience and the love of God is still with us. Christ, the gardener, helps us to live lives of fruitfulness.

"What are you living for?" Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live." Repentance is discovering a God-given purpose of life that we would die for. What are you living for?

An elementary school teacher asked first graders. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" One kid replied, "I want to get a lot of money and be a millionaire." Another student answered, "I want to be President and run the country. Kids raised their hand and shared what they wanted to be. Then, the teacher asked one boy who had just listened to what the others said. "What do you want to do?" the boy replied, "I want to do what my father does." "What does your father do?" The boy answered in a small voice. "My father is a bell-ringer. People wake up and pray when they hear the bell. I would like to be a bell-ringer like my father." I believe that we are called to ring the bell of hope in the age of despair. We are called to ring the bell of peace in a world filled with violence. We are called to ring the bell of love in this divisive world. As I always say, start with small things but keep doing them. Christ will help us to bear fruit! Amen.