

Lent 3C (2/28/2016)
Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Tragedy is not divine retribution for sin. As badly as we want to know the reason for suffering, God's wrath isn't it. And, God's favor is not the reason we escape misfortune. We all fall short of the glory of God, yet God does not hasten to punish us. Instead, God tends to us by mercy and rouses us to repentance.

My chaplaincy internship took place at a small hospital in an old neighborhood on the outskirts of Chicago. I completed my regular rounds in the telemetry unit, where patients' hearts were monitored around the clock for a variety of reasons. It was a busy summer at the hospital, so telemetry also handled spill-over from other units. As a result, every visit with a new patient was unpredictable. Reasons for their hospitalization ranged from blood clots to congestive heart failure to overdoses to mental illness.

It's a funny thing to walk into a stranger's hospital room knowing nothing about his or her story. Some patients spoke openly about their circumstances; others were more reticent. Over time, I developed an approach to patients that I believe made for deeper conversation and better spiritual care. If ever I was at a loss for where to begin, I would say something like, "Here you are, laid up in the hospital, attached to a monitor for your heart. What do you make of that?" Most of the time, patients would respond by explaining their medical condition or lamenting their frenzied pace of life. But

sometimes, they would make spiritual sense of the situation. On one occasion, a gentleman said without hesitation, “This is punishment for my sins.” It was hard to hear. I didn’t like this man’s interpretation of his medical crisis as divine retribution for bad behavior, but I also didn’t want to project my discomfort onto him. If the notion of punishment was helpful for his healing, fine, but I couldn’t shake the suspicion that it was dangerous theology.

To my great relief, Jesus agrees. Upon hearing the story of some Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices in the temple, Jesus seizes upon an opportunity to address the question of suffering:

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ...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?

The unequivocal answer is no. Jesus avows that **tragedy is not divine retribution for sin. God does not assign earthly penalties according to the severity of our offenses.** So, as badly as we want to know the reason for suffering, God’s wrath isn’t it. And, the opposite is also true: God’s favor is not the reason we escape misfortune. Life is simply fragile and unpredictable.

So, suffering is not a cause for shame, and neither is it an occasion to pronounce judgment on others. Nevertheless, the fragility of life gives it a certain urgency. “Unless you repent,” Jesus insists, “you will all perish....” Suffering, and especially sudden and tragic suffering, shakes us out of our apathetic self-assurance and compels us to refocus our attention on what

matters most in life – in a word, to repent.¹ Jesus implies that every new moment is a gift, so now is the time to realign our hearts and our lives with God's purpose for us.

In other words, now is the time to bear fruit. The parable of the fig tree acknowledges first and foremost our struggle to be faithful, our sluggishness to bear fruit worthy of God's kingdom. The owner of the vineyard is at the end of his rope: "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none.... Why should it be wasting the soil?" Our natural tendency is not to flourish, but to resist the influence of grace on the way we live and the way we love. To borrow Paul's famous confession, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."² Like the fruitless fig tree, we might as well be cut down.

But, the twist at the end of the parable provides a critical insight into the nature of grace. The gardener replies, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." **One more year. God is more gracious than we would expect, and elects not to exact punishment for our failure, but rather, with continued care, to give us another chance to change.**

From this perspective, we begin to glimpse the significance of the cross.

Our resistance to the will of God is deadly, but God refuses the way of

¹ See Matt Skinner, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2789.

² Romans 3:23.

retribution. Rather than overcome our sin by a show of power, on the cross God endures it, and exposes its futility. God does not respond to our disobedience with punishment, but with forgiveness and new life.

So, Jesus' call to repentance is less a threat than it is a precious opportunity. We all fall short of the glory of God, and we fall hard. The wonder of grace is that **God does not hasten to punish us, but instead meets us at rock bottom and tends to us with mercy. Repentance means to take the hand that reaches out to us when we come to, rise to our feet again, and renew our commitment to the way of the One who rescued us.**