



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Unless You Repent

Luke 13.1-9

Fr. William Klock

January 4, 2015 – Christmas 2

How do we respond when bad things happen? Do we blame God? Do we blame the devil? Do we blame ourselves or the person to whom the bad thing happened? Last week when I was in the locker room at the Aquatic Centre a guy walked in talking away on his cell phone. There are signs everywhere reminding people that cell phones aren't permitted in the locker room. People have been known take photos and that sort of thing, so no cell phones are allowed. This guy obviously wasn't taking any pictures, but he was approached by two men who chose to be sticklers about the rules. He ignored the first man and when the second man said something he managed to break off his phone conversation just long enough to throw some crude language at the man. The cell phone guy chose a locker near mine and I was amazed at how deftly he managed to remove all of his clothes without ever stopping his conversation or dropping his phone. He stuffed everything in his locker, picked up his bathing suit, and—still yakking away on his phone—walked out to the pool deck, bathing suit in hand. I heard he walk half-way across the pool deck, still so engrossed in his phone conversation that it took him that long to notice patrons and staff were freaking out about him being naked. A couple of the guys in the locker room had one word in response: Karma. If you do bad things, bad things will happen to you. If you do good things, good things will happen to you. It's a mechanistic view of the universe and it's totally pagan.

On a more serious note, though, many Christians are convinced that our blessings are God's reward for righteousness and that our trials and our suffering are punishment for our sins. We *should* indeed thank God for our blessings, but we can never claim our

righteousness or our faithfulness as the reason for them. We have no basis to make that kind of a claim. Whatever faith and whatever righteousness we have are gifts of the Holy Spirit. We didn't earn them. They're entirely gifts of God's grace. Our brothers and sisters facing poverty in the Third World or persecution and martyrdom in Sudan or Iraq are no less faithful than we are. Their witness reveals that they may, in fact, be *more* faithful than we. And yet they live with poverty and persecution. On the other hand I've been at the bedside of Christians suffering from terrible pain or illness who have desperately confessed their sins and wracked their brains or asked me for ideas as to what unconfessed sins they may have forgotten. They were sure that their suffering was God's punishment and that if they only figured out what they'd done wrong and confessed it that God would heal them. In contrast, I've also talked to Christians who are so confident of their righteousness that they refuse to take any personal responsibility for their trials and chalk it all up to the devil persecuting them for their righteousness.

None of this is to say that God doesn't sometimes reward faithfulness with material blessing, that he doesn't afflict us to get our attention, or that the devil doesn't persecute. But Scripture warns us that we can never be like the pagans in thinking that God works according to some mechanistic system of reward and punishment. Scripture reminds us that, in fact, God is sovereign over his creation. Jesus recently reminded us in Luke's Gospel that not even the sparrows sold in the market go unnoticed by God. But the book of Job also reminds us that it's beyond our limited and very finite human perspective to delve into the sovereign purposes of God. He created us with limited knowledge and wisdom. And that's a good thing, because he intended from the beginning for us to trust his perfect knowledge and wisdom. At the end of the day we need to recognise that we sinners have upset the order of God's creation. Bad things happen and we have only ourselves to blame—whether our own personal sins, the sins of our fellow sinners, or the collective consequences of this race of sinners to

which we belong. The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus is Lord and he has come not to condemn sinners, but to redeem us from our bondage to sin and death. He has come to set creation—to set God's temple—to rights, to restore order, to take the throne, to free us, and to give us life again.

And yet there's a warning in all that Good News. Jesus has come to redeem sinners from judgement, but judgement is still coming. The only way of escape is in Jesus. Sinners have to repent—to turn around—and to reorient their lives around and in Jesus. And that's the message of our lesson today as we begin Luke 13.

Jesus is on his way to from Galilee to Jerusalem with his disciples. He's been using the journey to teach them what it means to follow him—what it means to be a disciple. He's been talking about the *cost* of discipleship. It means giving up everything to follow where Jesus leads, even if that means cutting ties with one's people or one's family, even if it means following Jesus to death. At the end of Chapter 12 Jesus told the crowd around him that judgement was coming on Israel for her unfaithfulness—that the signs were all around them and that if they didn't repent they would face judgement.

That's where Chapter 13 picks up. Look at verses 1-2:

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"

Jesus has been talking about judgement and he's been talking about interpreting the present time and that prompted these people to ask him about this awful incident. We don't have any historical records of such an incident, but it certainly fits Pilate's profile. He was a ruthless man. The Jews did not make Judea an easy province to govern. There had been numerous uprisings over the years and there would be more to come. Pilate's job was both to keep the

peace while also asserting Rome's authority. Those two things were impossible to balance. He tried to bring Roman military standards with their pagan symbolism into Jerusalem as a symbol of Roman authority and it caused a riot. He provoked a rebellion when he took money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then ruthlessly quashed that rebellion. And now these people tell Jesus about an incident in which Pilate apparently slaughtered a group of pilgrims from Galilee in the temple. It probably happened at Passover, which was the only time the people sacrificed their animal themselves. Imagine Christians being slaughtered as they knelt at the communion rail on an Easter Sunday and that will give you a sense of what this slaughter would have meant to the Jews.

But these people ask Jesus about this incident out of a self-righteous attitude. They've heard Jesus talking about judgement and about interpreting the times, but they're not connecting the dots right. They're suggesting to Jesus that the people slaughtered by Pilate deserved what they got. And this was typical Jewish thinking of the time. People assumed that if something bad happened to you it was because of some sin you'd committed. Think of the blind man Jesus and his disciple encounter in Chapter 9 of St. John's Gospel. Their first question is to ask Jesus whether the man had sinned himself or whether it was his parents' sin that had made him blind. They didn't ask *if* sin had made him blind. That was a given. It was just a question of whether it was his sin or his parents'. And there, just as here, Jesus doesn't even respond to that part of the question. He told them, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). Jesus then healed the man, displaying the works of God.

How often do we make the mistake these people made that day in the crowd? We assume that our affliction or someone else's is God's judgement on sin. Or, conversely, we assume that something good is God's reward for our

righteousness. These things are possible, but we don't have the knowledge and wisdom of God to make such declarations ourselves. Like Job we need to cover our mouths and let God reveal himself in the circumstances of life, whether that's through healing or prosperity or through the testimony of grace and peace in the face of trial and tribulation. We need to make everything, good or bad, in life an opportunity to find our life in Jesus. This is how St. Paul can tell us to give thanks in *all* things.

But in particular here, Jesus rebukes the self-righteous thinking of these people and uses it as an opportunity to call them to repentance. He says in verse 3:

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

They were thinking that Pilate's slaughter was God's decree of judgement on some people guilty of some horrible secret sin. Jesus warns them to stop worrying about the sins of others and to worry about their own. Don't dwell so much on judging others that you never repent yourself. They gave him an example and now he gives them another one just to make his point.

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Siloam was a reservoir in the southeast part of Jerusalem, near the wall. Jesus might be describing something that happened when Pilate was building the aqueduct using the money he took from the temple. Whatever the case a tower collapsed and eighteen people died in the accident. Their example was an "act of Pilate". Jesus' example is an "act of God". And Jesus asks if their reasoning still applies. Of course it doesn't and, again, he calls them to repent.

But there's something else here that we might miss. The people ask him about this slaughter carried out by Pilate, the

Roman governor. Jesus' example describes a tower in Jerusalem falling down and killing people. They're worried about judging the people who died in these tragic events. But Jesus warns them that unless they repent they will all *likewise* perish.

But repent of what? Jesus' call isn't just to repent from sin. It's to repent from a whole way of life and a whole misguided notion of what God's plan is. It's to repent from this idea that God works mechanistically and that we then have a right or duty to judge people when bad things happen to them. It's to repent from the idea that the Messiah has come to vindicate Israel for her righteousness and to drown the gentiles in judgement. That's not what Jesus came to do.

Instead, Jesus has come to call Israel to repentance and to warn her that judgement is coming—not on the nations, but on her. These people need to stop worrying about whether this or that group is unrighteous and start worrying about themselves and whether they're following God or not. If they don't repent and if they don't reorient their lives around Jesus and his kingdom God will bring the Romans in judgement and there will be a blood bath, not just in the temple with a few Galileans, but throughout the city. It won't just be the tower of Siloam falling on eighteen people, but the Romans overthrowing Jerusalem and the temple stone by stone. Of course this is precisely what happened forty years later.

But the people don't really understand and so Jesus tells them one of his stories. Look at verses 6-9:

And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear

fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Jesus is warning the people about just how urgent it is that they repent—that they start following him and his kingdom teaching instead of their old misconceptions about the kingdom, about what it mean to be Israel, and about what it meant to be righteous. God is merciful—he’s sent his Messiah to redeem. And God is patient—he’s put up with his people abandoning their mission for centuries. But there’s a limit to God’s mercy and patience. His mercy is *only* found through Jesus and he’s given a *limited* amount of time before judgement comes on the unrepentant.

Jesus draws on the Micah’s prophecy as he tells a story about a fig tree. In Micah 7 the prophet describes his search for righteousness in Israel in terms of picked-over fields. Even when Israel apostatised, there was always supposed to be at least a faithful remnant, but even the remnant of faithfulness can’t be found by Micah. There’s nothing left. Not only have the harvester been through, but so have the gleaners, to pick what was left of the grapes and the figs. Have you ever been disappointed by a picked over garden or orchard? I remember times going out to pick blackberries when the season was almost over and coming home with nothing or very nearly nothing. Everything had been picked or been left to rot. That’s Micah’s image of righteousness in Israel. And now Jesus picks up that well-known imagery. Israel is like a barren fig tree. After three years it hasn’t borne any fruit and the owner wants to cut it down so that he can plant something productive in its place. But the caretaker begs him not to. One more year, he pleads. Let me prune it and fertilise it and water it for one more year, then if there’s still no fruit, the owner can cut it down.

Jesus’ parable is a warning that can be taken in two ways. The owner of the tree and the vineyard could be Jesus. For three years he’s been coming to the tree and looking for fruit of repentance. He’s been watering the fertilising the

tree with miracles of deliverance and healing. But so far the most he’s been able to find on the tree is a bit of half-formed fruit—a handful of followers who still don’t really understand his message very well. Jesus is warning the people that as the tree has one more year, he’s giving them one more chance—one more chance to the people, the scribes, to the Pharisees, and to the corrupt priests in the temple: repent and follow me. If you keep going the way you’re going, if you keeping looking for God’s kingdom through earthly means and through the sword, Pilate’s slaughter and the falling tower of Siloam will be nothing compared to the slaughter and destruction that will come.

We could also understand God as the owner of the vineyard. He planted Israel to bear fruit and he’s come year after year and found nothing. He’s ready to chop it down and to plant a new tree, but he’s sent his Son, the vinedresser, to give Israel one last chance—to show his mighty deeds and to preach repentance so that the tree might finally bear fruit.

Either way, the warning is the same: bear fruit or be cut down; repent or face judgement. Israel refused to hear Jesus. She killed the vinedresser and carried on with her misguided ideas about the kingdom and about God and his plan and as a direct result was destroyed in A.D. 70. Just as Jesus had said, Pilate’s slaughter and the falling tower were just a foretaste of the judgement God brought as he cut the tree down.

As I’ve said before, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans was a sort of sacramental sign and seal of the final judgement yet to come. Brothers and sisters, the good news is that when God cut down the dead tree of Israel, he had already prepared a living branch to take its place. Jesus, the Son of David, fulfilled Israel’s mission. He is the light of the world. And his Holy Spirit now grafts into him all who hear his message and repent. And that’s the difference between the old tree and the new: the Holy Spirit. The new tree is empowered to bear fruit in ways the old tree never was: love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. That’s the good news. But just as the Gospel was a warning to Old Israel, it is a warning to the New Israel as well. God’s judgement is coming and this time it won’t simply involve the destruction of a relatively small piece of real estate by a Roman army. When divine judgement comes again it will be eternal—once and for all for the whole human race. And that means that just like the self-righteous people to whom Jesus was speaking on that day so long ago, we need to stop worrying about judging others and concern ourselves with the work of the kingdom. We need to remember that Jesus was sent into the world not to condemn, but to redeem. We need to remember that the mercy and patience of God are endless, but not for those who fail to repent. We need to remember that our time in this life is short and we need to use it to the best advantage of the kingdom. Brothers and sisters, our Lord offers to water and fertilise us with Word and Sacrament. Let us not refuse his nurturing care, but drink deeply of his living water. Our Lord has poured his Spirit into us in Holy Baptism. Let us not squander that gift. Instead we need to let the heavenly vinedresser cultivate his fruit in our lives. That when the owner of the vineyard returns he will find us preaching good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the captives—bearing fruit and being light in the darkness.

Let us pray: Merciful and patient Father, in the collect we thanked you for the light of your Incarnate Word that you have poured out on us and we asked you to kindle that light in our hearts that it might shine forth into the world. Teach us to take full advantage of your gift of grace, Father. Teach us to make your Word and your Sacraments our food. Remind us that your Spirit is our life. Cultivate in us good fruit that we might not be found barren when your Son returns. Amen.