

March 7, 2010
Lent 3

"Tragedies Remind Us the Lord Wants Repentance"

LUKE 13:1-9

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them-- do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." ⁶ Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' ⁸ "Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

I am holding a rock in my hand about the size of a softball. A man was driving over San Marcos Pass between Santa Barbara and Santa Ynez when a rock this size came loose and tumbled down the cliff. It went through the canvass roof of the man's car, struck him on the head and killed him instantly. The Santa Barbara News Press reported this strange sequence of events as an act of God. Insurance companies label earthquakes, tornadoes and tsunamis acts of God.

As long as this world stands there will be tragedies such as the earthquake in Haiti that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. God allows these tragedies to come because of Adam's fall into sin, not as a direct result of things we do wrong. In addition to these so called acts of God, there are other man made tragedies such as suicide bombers setting off bombs in crowded buildings or flying airplanes into buildings.

When tragedies do strike there is this natural inclination to ask "Why did this happen to me?" Immediately after the earthquake in Haiti one famous television evangelist made the statement that God was punishing the people of Haiti for practicing voodoo. Shortly after 9-11 there were people saying our country was getting what it deserved for mistreating other nations. When Job lost his children, his wealth and his health, even his best friends were encouraging him to search his life and look for the huge sin he had committed which caused God to punish him so severely.

This morning we want Jesus to show us how tragedies can serve a good purpose as they remind all of us about the importance of repentance.

Tragedies will come

The people in Jerusalem were listening to Jesus talk about the last days and getting ready for facing God in the final judgment. Someone in that crowd wanted Jesus to give his take

or spin on a terrible tragedy that happened to some Galileans when they came to worship in the temple of the Lord. "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." It seems there was just as much violence in the Mideast at the time of Jesus as there is today. Whatever the Galileans did to anger the Romans, Pontius Pilate responded with shock and awe. He killed some Galileans in the temple of the Lord and mixed their blood with the blood of the sacrificial animals. People are asking this week, "Why does God allow a monster of a man to torture and kill a seventeen year girl in San Diego County?" People who loved this girl, especially her parents, are asking why this tragedy had to come to them and why God did not do more to stop it from happening.

Listen to how Jesus handles this very tough question. In typical fashion Jesus answers a question in the minds of these people by raising another question. He says, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" We tend to judge people with an evil meter such as this meter I am holding in my hand. If people are really bad on a scale of one to ten, we tend to think they deserve to be punished more by God than people who are a four or five.

Jesus raises the all important question, "Do people experience tragedy because some are more evil than others?" I am going to begin a Bible verse and I know you can complete it with me. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." There is not a person on this earth who can say, "I have not fallen short of God's glory." Who would dare to say, "That man's house deserves to burn to the ground because he gets drunk every night, beats his wife and kicks his dog." Can we say we better than he is? God's standard for justice is that all have fallen short of his glory. Tragedies will come to all people because we are living in a dying world because of Adam's fall into sin.

Jesus answers their question about tragedies with yet another question about another tragedy? "Or those who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them-do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Remember the earthquake that hit in the Paso Robles area a few years ago. I was standing in the middle of this church as the building shook. A woman was killed in Paso Robles when she tried to get out of a building and bricks fell on her head and took her life. How terrible it would be for me to think I am better than another person who died because I survived and that person did not survive. How terrible to think the people in Haiti are more evil than the people in the Dominican Republic and that is why they were spared.

Whether it is Haitians who suffer, or people in Darfur who are starving, or families in Santa Maria going through crisis because someone they love is dying, God has a higher purpose and gracious plan that always fills our lives with hope. God wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Jesus tells us that tragedies can be used by our loving God to lead people to repentance.

The Lord will lead people to repentance

In verse 3 Jesus says, "But unless you repent, you will all perish." Then he says again in verse 5, "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish." The word that is used here for "repent" literally means to change your mind about something. You woke up this

morning and decided to have toast for breakfast, but then changed your mind to have cereal instead. You decide on a career or job but then change your mind. When you were brought to faith by the work of the Holy Spirit, you were taken from a belief system that said, "I can save myself" to trusting in Jesus to rescue you.

We were born obsessive compulsive or "OC" when it comes to thinking we could save ourselves. Have you ever driven down the block and then turned around to check whether or not you closed the garage door after you left? That is not being obsessive compulsive. But if you keep doing it several times, that is obsessive compulsive. Before you were turned around by God's love, you repeatedly thought you could make up for the bad you did today by the good you do tomorrow. You were so blind that you did not realize your best efforts were just as much a failure as what you did wrong in the first place. Isaiah 64 says this about our best efforts, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags, we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like wind our sins sweep us away."

Jesus told a good story about repentance. He told of two men who went to the temple to pray. One man prayed about himself, "God I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers, adulterers." He thanked God that he was not as evil as other people were. Out of the corner of his eye he looked a tax collector who had come to pray and said, "Or even like this tax collector." Then he went on to brag about the good things he did. "I fast twice a week, and give a tenth of all that I get." Then the other man, the tax collector, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven. He was so ashamed of the sinful life he lived. He pounded his hands on his chest and said, "God have mercy on me a sinner." Jesus said this man went home justified, forgiven, and at peace with God.

The Lord our God uses tragedies to give us a wake up call. What if the big one hits Southern California or the Central Coast? What if I run out of the building and a brick falls on my head or a rock falls off San Marcos Pass and crashes through the windshield, am I ready to meet the Lord? What if this is the last week of the world's history and Jesus returns? Jesus wants us pounding on our chest and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus wants all of us to be able to lift up our heads and know that our redemption is drawing near, that is coming to take us home.

Jesus tells the story of a man who planted a fig tree to show us our time to repent is limited. "A man had fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it and did not find any." People loved their fig trees at Jesus time. Here was a tree that always seemed to bear fruit, whether it was hot or cold, wet or dry. You did not have to do much to keep a fig tree bearing fruit in Palestine. That's why the story Jesus told seemed so strange to the people who were listening. For three years a man looked for fruit on the tree and it bore nothing. "For three years I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" Every year this man looked for some change in the fig tree, some evidence of little figs starting to grow in the branches, but no matter what they did to encourage the growth there was nothing.

The person who was tending the fig tree pleaded for more time. "Sir," the man replied, "Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not then cut it down." One more year. One more day. One more hour. That is what the Lord our God is giving us to reach people with the gospel message,

to bring them to repentance and to lead them to put their trust in Jesus for their hope of being saved. Peter 3: 9 says: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises as some understand slowness. God is patient with you, and not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The Lord will even allow Christians to suffer in this world rather than take them home to glory, so their suffering can be used to bring glory to Jesus and turn the hearts of others to Christ. 1 Peter 4:16 says: "If you suffer as a Christian do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."

Feel your pulse beating in your arm. How many times does your heart beat each minute? 60? 70? 80? 500,000 times a year! The Lord knows every heartbeat of our lives even when tragedies strike. He knows exactly when our heart will have its last beat. Life is precious, so precious, even in times of tragedy. It is a time to repent and believe. It is a time to be used by the Lord to lead others to put their trust in Jesus. Amen.