

Lent 3
February 28, 2016

“Jesus Teaches Us About Tragedies and 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.'"

Some years ago a man was driving his convertible over the San Marcos Pass from Santa Barbara to Santa Ynez. A rock about the size of a softball came rolling down the mountain. It struck the man on the head and killed him instantly. The Santa Barbara News Press reported this strange death as an act of God. An act of God? Why do insurance companies label tragedies such as earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes and tsunamis as acts of God?

Tragedies come because of natural disasters. They also come into our lives because evil people ruthlessly take the lives of other people. You can remember exactly where you were when you first heard the news about the airplanes that slammed into the World Trade Center towers and into the Pentagon. Some of you are old enough to remember exactly where you were when the news came that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Columbine, Sandy Hook, Oklahoma City, and now San Bernardino are synonymous with horrific acts of violence that shock us and create images in our minds that we never forget.

So it was with the people who were listening to Jesus speak about the end of the world and the coming judgment. They had questions about tragedies in their day such as Pontius Pilate spilling the blood of Galileans as they worshipped in the temple of the Lord. Were these people worse than others? Was that the reason they had such violent deaths? Was the man who was hit on the head by a rock as he drove over San Marcos being punished by God for something he had done wrong in his life? This morning we want to hear what Jesus says to us about tragedies and the importance of repenting of our sins.

Tragedies will happen

A large crowd of people gathered around Jesus to hear him preach and teach. Earlier it says that this crowd numbered in the thousands and they were trampling on one another to get closer to Jesus to hear him speak. Jesus wanted these people who were like lost sheep to come to repentance. He spares no words as he calls them hypocrites because

they can see the signs for changes in the weather but they cannot see evidence the world will come to an end and they will have to face God in the final judgment. That's the greatest tragedy any person can ever face in life. Standing before God in the final judgment without the forgiveness that only Jesus can give.

Some of the people in the large crowd told Jesus about a tragedy that occurred when some Galileans were killed by Pontius Pilate as they worshipped in the temple of the Lord. Their blood poured out on the ground in the very place where animal sacrifices were made. Jesus used this opportunity to teach about repentance. "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish."

Jesus knows what is in their hearts. They assumed that because these Galileans had died such a violent death they were being punished for something they had done wrong. That's the way people thought then and they still think that way today. Maybe you have even heard someone say, "What have I done wrong to deserve this?" You will recall how Job's friend visited him to help him find out what he had done wrong in his life that led to lose his children, his wealth and his health. Even Jesus' disciples thought this way. They once asked Jesus why a blind man was born blind. Did he sin or did his parents sin that caused him to be born blind?

Were some Galileans worse than others? Is that the reason they had such violent deaths? No, when it comes to the problem of sin we all fall short of the glory of God. As we heard in our sermon here last Wednesday from Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray." Job was certainly a very nice man. Look at the tragedies that came into his life. A doctor once told me that treating people with cancer was not easy for him personally because it seemed it was the nicest people that got cancer.

The other day I saw that the televangelist Pat Robertson was endorsing one of candidates running for president. When the terrible earthquake hit Haiti a few years ago, he made the foolish statement that these people were being punished because of their practice of voodoo. Even when the towers went down there were some who implied this was happening to the United States because of the way we mistreated people in the Mideast.

It is ingrained in us from birth that we are punished for doing things wrong and rewarded for doing things right. In the musical *Sound of Music* Maria sings a beautiful song that attributes the reason for her falling in love with Baron von Trapp to doing something good in her past life. She sings over and over again, "Somewhere in my childhood, I must have done something good." Let's be honest as we examine our childhood years. There certainly was not enough good in my life compared to the bad to warrant any special favor from God. We desperately need Jesus.

To help these people focus on the tragedy of sin in their lives and lead them to repentance, Jesus calls their attention to another tragedy that took place also in Jerusalem. "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? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish." Accidents happen. People die when buildings collapse in an earthquake. People die when tornadoes tear through towns. People die when a big truck runs a stop

light slams into the side of van filled with people. When death comes the opportunity to repent and believe comes to an end.

Let's talk a little more about that important word "repent." It comes from the Greek word "metanoia" which means to change your mind or your way of thinking. Once again we think of the words of Isaiah 53:6 that tell us we are sheep that go astray. That is a whole new way of thinking about yourself. You were like a sheep that wandered off. You got lost and then faced the danger of perishing eternally in hell. Ingrained in our thinking is the idea that by doing something good we can get back on the right path and God will reward us with heaven. But then you were led to repentance. Repentance is turning away from sin and away from trusting in yourself and turning to Jesus as the Shepherd who has come to rescue you and save you. That's what Jesus wants for all people. That is why in John 10 he said, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

The Lord works repentance

Repentance is not something we work inside of ourselves. It is something God works in us by his grace. Jesus tells a parable to help us understand this. "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who takes 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 soil?'"

Fig trees love to bear fruit and provide delicious tasty figs that can be eaten fresh from the tree or eaten later as dried figs. I am holding in my hand a branch from a fig tree in my back yard. It is starting to put out leaves and there are already little figs starting to develop. Every year it provides us with figs. I am also holding in my hand a branch from the plum tree next to the fig tree. It has green leaves and blossoms. For the past three years it has given us very little fruit. I will wait one more year. If there are few plums this year then I will cut the plum tree down and use some of the wood for my barbeque and burn the rest in the fireplace.

Every tragedy that takes place in our world, or in our country or in our community is a reminder that our time of grace could come to an end soon. You pull over when you hear the siren coming down the street. Some day the ambulance may come to you. The time to turn away from sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness is today and not tomorrow. 1 Peter 3:9 says that the Lord is "not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance."

Last Wednesday evening I was driving down Union Valley Parkway to the church for our choir practice and midweek Lenten service. As I approached the intersection of Union Valley and Hummel a car stopped at the stop sign shot through the intersection as I was approaching. Half way across the road he stopped. I was able to brake and maneuver my car around his without flipping over my small SUV. My heart was pounding with fear. I thought of Susan coming ten minutes later and seeing where I had t-boned this careless driver. Would I still be alive? Who would tell the people coming to choir and church services what had happened to their pastor? Would I be in the hospital? Would I have died? These are thoughts that rush through your mind as you tremble because you were

so close to being seriously injured or even killed in a car accident.

So what if you survive the accident? What if you live through the heart attack? What if you were one of the ones who lived when the towers came down? If you survive then God's grace that brought you to repentance will continue to lead you to repentance. God's love that opened your eyes to see the tragedy of sin in your life and the blood of Jesus that frees you from all will continue to help you repent when sin pops up in your life. In the story Jesus told about the fig tree, the man who took care of the fig tree asks for one more year to dig around the tree and fertilize it. Amid all the tragedies that life brings, the Lord has his time of grace where he will dig around you and nourish you in his Word so you can bring forth fruits of repentance. Strange as it may seem, some of the best fruit ever produced in your life and mine will come when tragedies strike. With the Apostle Paul we can say, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." By God's grace we have another week of life on this earth for him to lead us to repentance. Another week to turn away from sin and turn to Jesus. Amen.