

## “Take Time to be Holy”

A sermon based on Isaiah 55:1-9 and Luke 13:1-9  
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
on Sunday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
By David Oliver-Holder

I just love the wisdom of those who put together the lectionary. For here we are, half way through the Lenten season. Those of us who took on Lenten disciplines, liking giving something up for these 40 days, we are really being tested just now. Especially if your sacrifice involves food. An Erma Bombeck quote sums it up well. She wrote, “I just clipped 2 articles from a current magazine. One is a diet guaranteed to drop 5 pounds off my body in a weekend. The other is a recipe for a 6-minute pecan pie.” That’s what I mean by being tested.

Well, just when we need a word of encouragement, just when we need a good vision to remind us why we take on disciplines during the season of Lent, the lectionary offers us this wonderful passage from Isaiah.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

We hear that and we spiritual athletes say, “Now that’s what I’m talking about!” What the prophet says sound great to me today.

“Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” Mmm, I can just about taste that pecan pie now.

But then we are brought up short by this: “let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD,”

Oh, yeah. I remember that’s why I am disciplining myself. As a dieter sacrifices for their health and well-being, we discipline ourselves spiritually, sometimes for these reasons, too, but mainly for what comes next, “let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

That’s just the reminder, this banquet is just the vision, we need to see us through to the celebration of the feast of the resurrection. It’s about our

relationship with God. We are striving, disciplining, sacrificing, suffering (?), so that our relationship with God will grow deeper.

The banquet will be a reward, yes. Ending our disciplines to celebrate, breaking our fasts, should always be done as festively as we know how. But those metaphors ultimately are about what being with God is really like.

The trouble for us comes because we allow many other things to get in the way. To enjoy the more mature blessings, we are called to give up the superficial and immature.

For us, especially in our superficial culture, that feels like suffering. How do we do that? How do we turn from what our culture values to what Christ would have us long for and strive for? We do that through repentance, or turning, as Isaiah and Jesus declare, and also through trusting God's way with us. That is what the passage from Luke 13 is about, trusting in God's providence.

## II

The scene begins rather commonly. It seems Jesus is always being told about some event that has happened, or something that someone has said. And the news is always followed with, "Well, Jesus, what do you think about that?"

It is what happens here. Someone in the crowd comes to Jesus to tell him about some Galileans that Pilate has murdered. Jesus then brings up another event, in which the Tower of Siloam fell, killing 18 people. Jesus links the two events, but they are very different.

Take the Galileans. They died as a result of Pilate's willful action. This would have been no surprise to the people of that time. The Jewish historian Josephus provides vivid examples of the ruthlessness of Pilate, though he says nothing about this particular event.

Most likely the Galileans were traveling to Jerusalem for peaceful purposes, perhaps to observe the Passover. And Pilate had them killed. Who knows why? What we do know is that it did not take much to provoke him.

Then there are the people killed by the tower. Their deaths are entirely accidental. They are just 18 people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So we have two events that seem entirely different. What is the link? Why does Jesus tie them together? Jesus ties them together because of the way both events are understood. Both events prompt the universal question: “Why did this tragedy happen to these people?”

The common answer given was this: such tragedies happen because sins need to be punished. “It happened because they had it coming.” Sound familiar? I think it does because even those of us who claim to know better often react the same way. As one writer suggests, “Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs.”<sup>i</sup> We look for some cause to explain what has happened in the hope that we can prevent it from happening again. The commentator writes perceptively, “What this tells us is that we are less interested in truths than consequences.”

The disciples reason the same way. On another occasion, they are out walking with Jesus one day when they pass by a man who was born blind. What do they ask? “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

It is a common enough leap. So when Jesus is told the news about the Galileans, he intuits that they are really asking a question. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”

It is a tempting equation that would seem to solve a lot of problems. First, it answers the riddle of why bad things happen to good people: They don't. Bad things happen to bad people. Second, it punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone. Third, it gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction. Any questions?

It would be so simple if reality worked this way. But do things work this way? Is the connection between sin and suffering of such a general nature that we can say with authority that the good always prosper and are healthy, while the bad sink into poverty and illness?

Some biblical writers seem to say yes. Listen to Psalm One: “Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the Law of the Lord...He is like a tree planted by

streams of water... In all he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so...the wicked will not stand in the judgment.”

Many would agree. Indeed, one writer says that this notion is so widespread that many look upon a lack of success as a judgment of God. Some have even argued against acts of charity toward the down and out because such acts are thought to interfere with the judgment of God!

It is a tempting equation, but Jesus doesn't go there. “No,” he says. The first public words that Jesus spoke were, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed,…”

Jesus aligns himself with the other voices in scripture that bemoan the fact that the bad prosper while the good suffer all manner of evil. Jeremiah asked, “Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?” (Jer. 12:1) Job asked, “Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?” (Job 21:7)

Jesus knows well enough that sometimes the faithful suffer for being faithful. Sometimes the just suffer for being just. He will show it in his own life. He will suffer unjustly at the hands of lawless people.

“No,” Jesus says, “Those who suffer does not equal those who are the worst sinners.”

### III

It is then that Jesus strikes the strings of their hearts causing them to tremble. “But unless you repent you will all likewise die.” The people in the crowd are immediately brought to attention. “What can this mean?” “Will Pilate kill us, too? Will towers also fall on us, too?”

What Jesus means is that it doesn't matter whether suffering is random or decreed by the government. Jesus rejects all such calculation and speculation. It is futile. And it deflects us from the main issue: the obligation of every person to live in penitence and trust before God.

“Life is not a game of gaining favors and avoiding losses.” Without repentance, without turning toward God, all is lost anyway. It is gaining the world while losing your soul.

That is another reason Jesus links the two disasters. Both happen suddenly, with the devastation being total. Without warning, worshippers find themselves overcome by the power of Rome. Without warning, the tower collapses on those engaging in daily business. And no chance for repentance remains for any of them.

It is that turning Jesus wants for them, for all of us. Turning back toward God and God’s ways in the world, and turning back toward one another, toward community. In the face of disasters, either government orchestrated or entirely accidental, those usual answers that were offered, and that so often are still offered, do one thing: those usual answers hold us apart from one another. They separate us, it is hoped, from those who suffer.<sup>ii</sup> Instead of remembering all of the ways we are in this together, questions about who sinned strive to push sufferers away.

As one writer suggests, “When Jesus challenges his listeners’ assumptions and tells them to repent before it’s too late, I think part of what he’s saying is this: any question that allows us to keep a sanitized distance from the mystery and reality of another person’s pain is a question we need to un-ask.”<sup>iii</sup>

A better way has been shown to the world by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. In her speech before parliament after the shooting, she said, “One of the roles I never anticipated having, and hoped never to have, is to voice the grief of a nation. At this time, it has been second only to securing the care of those affected, and the safety of everyone. And in this role, I wanted to speak directly to the families. We cannot know your grief, but we can walk with you at every stage. We can. And we will...”

That is what solidarity looks and sounds like. That is what it means to turn back toward one another, toward community, remembering that we are all in this together.

The really good news is found in the parable. God is patient. There is time yet. God's mercy remains in serious conversation with God's judgment. There is time yet. But not unlimited time. "The man said, if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." The second letter of Peter tells us, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should die, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Pet. 3:9)

The things that happened to the Galileans and to the people under the tower, to the worshippers in Pittsburgh and New Zealand, each of these tragedies were fearful. But we can do something now so that we need have no fear of judgment. We can enjoy peace now, if we live in repentance and trust, and if we remember the human and divine bonds that tie us together. Jesus says now is the time to make turning the way of your life. AMEN.

---

<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*.

<sup>ii</sup> Thanks to Debie Thomas, "Ask a Better Question," posted at *JourneyWithJesus.net*, March 17, 2019.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas.