

3rd Sunday in Lent

28Feb16

Luke13:1-9; Isaiah55:1-9; 1Cor10:1-13

Among great philosophers, the ancient Greek Heraclitus said the only thing constant is change, while modern day mind Dan McGown reminds us that the only certainties are death and taxes.

With that, we'd have to expand the list to note that tragedies also seem all too regular and catastrophes much too common. The exact crises and numbers of victims may vary, but we're never far removed from some sort of disaster. Unfortunately, it's always been that way and likely will remain ever thus.

So also, today Jesus is discussing current events, two topics that would've been at the top of newspaper headlines or trending on Twitter in his day, though by all accounts, these persecutions and accidents are small potatoes. Other than this passage in Luke, there's no record of these people killed by Pilate nor even of where the tower of Siloam was, much less the calamity of it collapsing. One is human-perpetrated evil, violence from a brutal despot. The other natural evil, an unintentional mishap, nevertheless causing devastating destruction.

By the fact that Jesus needed to address them, we might suspect these events were evidently a big deal at the moment, but soon faded from memory, supplanted by another horror, some new tragedy in the endless funeral procession. As I was reading past commentaries on these lectionary texts, looking back over three year increments the calamity du jour had been bombings in Madrid and federal government budget sequestration and an earthquake in Haiti and another in Chile and terrorist attacks and an immigration border conflict and after the *Titanic* movie won Academy Awards, which is a twist for not letting the wreckage disappear but resurfacing it for other purposes. Some of these moments

you may recall, others are recessed farther back in memory.

I could similarly ask for three examples: what has been the worst news this week? In spite of still being able to name problems, we may say it's a relief that today we don't have to address the pressure of the hugest and hardest enduring questions confronting us with shorthand titles like "Paris" or "9\11" or "Katrina" or "Bangladesh" or "Exxon Valdez" or "Hiroshima" or any other days of infamy (a phrase itself that inescapably makes us continue to tremble from Pearl Harbor).

Large scale and small, passing or persistent, we're continually prompted toward theological conundrum: Does God cause these events to happen? Are they punishment? Is God randomly cruel? Is God inattentive to suffering or impotent to repair it, or actually nonexistent? In official terminology of trying to discern issues of God, evil, and suffering, it's the question of theodicy. Less officially phrased in protest, it's "C'mon, God! What gives?!"

As we engage this topic, we might first do well to note that the deaths Jesus is talking about are remote. He isn't dealing with the families of the victims or those who have been terrorized and traumatized by bloodshed and abuse. The question is more detached and speculative.

Yet we might also note that such distance has become more difficult for us. The pace of tragedy is increased by our 24-second news cycle that so continuously leads with what bleeds and updates us uninterruptedly with the latest shooting or senseless oppression or tower collapsing. The distance is decreased, as threats on the other side of the globe make us worry. Plus that somehow either is used to or unintentionally manages to keep us immobilized in fear. We stress at airports and for food supplies and in schools and over viruses and we attempt to barricade ourselves inside locked

houses and big vehicles and with castle laws and even by conversing with those of like mind. This means we don't do as well at assessing our fears and the problems and crises around us. All of it hits too close to home, so we aren't able to remove ourselves to ask the larger questions. Even the answers of faith, instead of a firm foundation, become doses of a fleeting antidote, tiny disclaimers of responsibility rather than reservoirs of relief.

We would be well-served by more speculative examination. I always say that at a funeral or in a hospital room is the wrong time to try changing somebody's theology. We need to be working on this and asking the hard questions so that we're ready and well-prepared for when we need it, not as we're grasping at the edge and gasping for breaths in the midst of trauma.

A starting point is exemplified in a phrase from 1st Corinthians, about past deaths being for our sake. Paul recounts stories of Exodus and Deuteronomy about those who died in the wilderness. He writes, "these occurred as examples for us." This perhaps parallels the concept "those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Yet we need to use it cautiously. If a past event may be employed to make things better for us, we are using it well. But we should not and cannot say that the crimes and disasters of history were caused for our sake, as mere learning opportunities. To say from the Holocaust "never again" is a lesson we must continue striving after not just in genocides but in our broad patterns of prejudice, exclusion, and hatred. But to claim that any death any suffering is worth it in order for us to know better or try harder is more than we ought to claim.

There's another problematic phrase in this 1st Corinthians reading. (For how full of grace Paul can be, this reading instead seems densely packed in obscuring good news.) Besides the

stuff on making examples and whether former difficulties were for your benefit, another questionable concept comes in a phrase that gets used at all the wrong times and becomes itself abusive. Though it tends to be offered with kind intentions, I'd almost like to eliminate this idea from our theological grab bag. The phrase is that "God will not let you be tested beyond your strength," with a corrupted paraphrase as "God won't give you more than you can handle."

First of all with this, we should clarify that nowhere in Paul's understanding do the temptations come from God. It is not God who is putting you to the test or trying to see how much you can endure. It's a despicable direction to say that you just need to put up with it because God won't give you more than you can bear, so whatever you're suffering must not be yet to your threshold. That leaves God as the bad guy and is essentially a message for you to buck up.

That distinction may not prove to be much resolution in the face of oppression or natural disasters, but it is critical amid crisis to be ready to declare that God is not causing those harms, or arbitrarily inflicting hardship on you. Instead, as Paul uses this concept, it is we who are testing or tempting ourselves. We are liable to lead ourselves astray and forget about or turn away from the good news of Jesus we share in community. That direction of turning is fundamental to this season of Lent, when we again focus specially on gathering together and being renewed by baptismal blessing from the God who promises to care for us. We re-turn to God.

This also at last returns us to our Gospel reading, which could have a difficult or misleading notion with Jesus talking about repentance. Again, it's a critical trajectory to trace. Some of Jesus' neighbors were killed by the vindictive Pontius Pilate. Did God cause it or

allow it because they were worse sinners? Our hopeful answer is resoundingly reinforced by Jesus: By no means! How about those smushed when the tower toppled? Was it because they were worse offenders? No, I tell you! Are some lives worth less, because of location or religion or morality? No. Because of gender or age or how much or little good they accomplish? No. Because of some indeterminate quality, an attribute known only to and judged solely by a hidden God, and of which we nevertheless need to be extraordinarily cautious lest we too perish?

Here, for our typical understanding, is where the rub lies. Jesus says, "repent, or you'll perish like them." Having been assured that God is not vengeful, capricious, or malicious—much less simply careless—these words cannot stand as threat. Since God is not testing you and since the misfortune of others cannot stand as a warning of divine displeasure, the issue of repentance is not a question of shaping up or reforming your status as a bad sinner or worse offender.

The better solution is to notice what Jesus means when he invites you to repent. Contrary to a sense that repentance is acknowledging how shameful or miserable you are and just how awful your existence must be and turning from the error of your ways, this repentance is turning toward a gracious and loving God who invites you to abundantly shared life. Even in the worst moments, you have hope.

The repentance here is precisely turning away from the distorted image of a God who is out to get you, who is lurking with punishments, standing in the way of your wellbeing. That is the worst of oppressive inventions and the opposite of who God strives to be in your life and for the life of this world. This is not a God who surprises you by dropping towers on you but who surprises you with love, constantly and unconditionally. This is a God of patience. Like

when a fig tree refuses to bear fruit and is unable to bring about any good, God is a gardener begging for more time, getting God's fingers dirty to dump manure around you. This God is like Ann Ward walking into the office in the middle of a cold winter afternoon with a bag of bright green flavorful spinach from the hoop house, bringing good from unexpected places.

"My ways are not your ways," God proclaims in our 1st reading, "my thoughts are higher than your thoughts." When we expect retribution, God in Christ is ready rather with abundant forgiveness, and continues begging your pardon, with hope for the despairing, who won't abandon you in the time of trial, won't give up on you even when you've given up.

Repentance isn't earning that from God, but turning to see God is already and always there.