

March 7, 2010 – Lent 3C – Luke 13:1-9

GRACE HAPPENS

Over the past few weeks we have been hearing lots of news about tragic happenings. First we had the devastation of Haiti, then we heard about raging floods in France, and most recently there has been yet another earthquake in Chile. These tragedies and others make many of us think about questions that we might like to ask Jesus if we could get him alone somewhere and have a conversation with him.

When disaster strikes, whether it is a natural disaster, or the result of some evil action, it is a part of our human nature to lay the blame at someone's feet. And if there is no obvious human agency to blame we take that famous section from the insurance industry and we say, "That was an act of God." And it is very easy to move from the conviction that God punishes sins to the assumption that suffering represents punishment. This is especially easy to do for those who believe that God is responsible for every action that occurs in our lives.

John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism wrote that nothing happened, not a tree fell in the forest, not a ship was lost at sea, not a traveler was robbed, not a merchant was successful – nothing happened that was not the direct will of God. "The human task," said Calvin, "was simply to accept and try to understand because this is the way life is!"

So we come to today's reading from Luke's gospel. Some people had gathered around Jesus with some tough theological questions. Questions that you and I might ask. "What about it Jesus, what about those Galileans?" This incident is not recorded anywhere else in the Bible, but apparently some of Pilate's soldiers had found some Galileans who were in the midst of their religious sacrifices, and the soldiers slaughtered the Galileans so that their human blood ran down and was mixed with the blood of the animals they were in the process of sacrificing.

I suppose it would be like if we were here celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion and some soldiers came in and killed us and our blood ran down and mixed with the communion wine. Not a very pleasant image for sure. It was an outrage, a mini holocaust. And now the question being put to Jesus was, "How could God allow this to happen?"

As I read this scripture and tried to make some sense out of it, I found myself asking, "I wonder what answer I would want from Jesus to that question?" What answer would you want if you could talk to Jesus face to face as those people were doing? What words of comfort and hope would you like to hear? I think that I may have expected some words of comfort and hope. But the words of Jesus took an entirely different direction. "Do you honestly believe that those Galileans were any worse sinners than you are? No, but I tell you that unless you repent you will perish just like them." Just a minute, Jesus. I was talking about the Galileans who were massacred by the Roman soldiers. I wasn't asking about me. Why are you turning it around to me? Jesus seems to be saying, "You're asking the wrong question." The right question is not, "Why did it happen to them." The right question is, "Why did it NOT happen to me?"

We don't have to get into the matter of whether tragedy in human life is the direct action of God or not to realize that, compared to those people in Haiti or France or Chile, we are incredibly blessed. I say that being fully aware that some of you who are here today have dealt with tragedy in your own lives. And I'm not making light of that in any way. And I don't believe that God makes light of that either. But I still say that we are incredibly blessed.

When was the last time that you saw someone go wrong, or you heard a story on the news and you said, "There but for the grace of God go I." We've all said that, haven't we? We don't say, "They must have deserved it." We say, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Then Jesus follows up on his answer by telling a parable about a fig tree. A fig tree, in those days, was normally given three years to grow and bear fruit and the first fruit had to be harvested and given to God. But this fig tree had been tended for nine years and there was still no fruit. And if you're in the fig selling business, a tree that bears no fruit in nine years isn't much good. Get rid of it. Cut it down.

But in this parable the fig tree represents us. You and me. And the gardener represents God. And God says, "No. Don't cut it down. Give it yet another chance to bear fruit." Amazing grace. I'm told that recovering alcoholics must acknowledge their addiction before they can begin the long journey back to health. They must first admit that they have a problem. But our society teaches us to admit nothing. And Jesus invites us to admit

everything. Why? Not so that we can be punished, but so that we may be free! It is fair to expect a fig tree to bear figs, and it is equally fair to expect Christian people to show signs of repentance. If we believe that we have been forgiven we must live as people who have truly been set free for life.

Luke does not tell us what happened to the fig tree. Did it bear fruit the next year? Or was it cut down? We don't know. And we don't know what will happen in our lives over the next year either. But we believe that the amazing grace of God is always there for us. Have we grown so accustomed to God's grace that we sometimes forget to give thanks? Do we forget to thank God for all the blessings that we have? Have we fallen into a pattern of complaining about what we don't have rather than a pattern of giving thanks for what we do have?

The fig tree was given a season to bear fruit. Lent is our season to think long and hard about these things. May God help us be thankful for God's amazing grace. Amen.