

Third Sunday in Lent  
March 11, 2007

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*Scriptures: Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8, 1Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9*

I don't know where it comes from, I suppose there are social scientists who could offer an explanation, but most of the time people have this innate sense for something we call justice. This idea that a crime should be accompanied by a punishment. We want those two things to go together. Negative action, negative consequence. If you do something bad, something bad will happen to you. And lots of times, that is how it works. It gives us a sense of things working right in the world. I know a few people, for example, who take a special delight to see the car that sped past them on the freeway pulled over by a patrol officer a few miles later.

But sometimes that is not how it works. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. And worse yet, good things happen to bad people. That's when the six-year-old in us cries out, "No fair!" We are uneasy with this reality where punishment and crime don't seem to be lining up. We want things to fit nicely. We want reasons for things being the way they are. Sometimes we come up with our own explanations for things that otherwise make no sense.

There was a time, for example, when some said that AIDS was God's punishment of gays and their homosexual behavior. We heard a lot about how Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment of New Orleans for its corruption. I even remember hearing someone say that the events of 9-11 were God's way of punishing the United States for having abandoned God, taking prayer out of schools, and what have you.

The point is, as humans we have long sought ways to make sense of the tragedy, loss and suffering that comes to our lives. Whenever there is great suffering, we ask why. Why did the tsunami hit? Why the tornados? Why the shootings in the schools? We want to know why.

Punishment ends up being a favorite answer to that question. I suppose when we tell ourselves that the bad things that happen in other people's lives are a punishment for their bad behavior, we can reassure ourselves that since we don't do those bad things, bad things won't happen to us. (This also is six-year-old thinking by the way.)

This mindset was especially prevalent in Jesus' day. In the gospel text for today, something happened in the temple, some people from back home, Galilee, were killed. And Jesus knew that the people would be thinking, "Well, they must have done something really bad for God to punish them in this way." Jesus bursts that bubble, in no uncertain terms. "Do you think these people were worse sinners than anyone else? No, I tell you. And those eighteen killed when that tower fell over in Siloam, were they worse sinners? No, I tell you" All of us are sinners. All of us are called to repentance. Okay, I get that loss, tragedy, and suffering are separate issues all together. But that still leaves the "Why?" question unanswered.

Some say that the bad things that happen to us are a test. I don't know what that might be about. I am never quite sure what they think God is testing for? Is there some test I have to pass in order to please God? No. Is there something God wants to know? I can't imagine what that would be, because, I don't know about you, but I am pretty sure that God already knows that I am finite and fallible. God already knows that sometimes I lose heart, and sometimes my faith falters. That's why I need God in the first place, to get me through those times.

Other people say that the bad things that happen to us really aren't bad, they are part of God's plan to do some greater good that we just don't understand yet. According to this thinking the tsunami hit so that generous amounts of aid and assistance could flow to that part of the world. Columbine happened so that people could be inspired by the witness of some of the victims. I am never quite comfortable with such assertions. I don't believe that God causes bad things to happen to us. That just doesn't jive with the loving God that I know through Jesus.

I do believe that when bad things happen in our lives, God uses those things, transforms those things, so that something good can come out of it. It is a little like the old saying about when life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Our sinful world gives God plenty of lemons. And God is always trying to make lemonade, or lemon bars, or lemon meringue pie. It's more complicated, takes longer, but is sweeter in the end.

Now, one thing I haven't ever been able to figure out is why Jesus tells this parable about the barren fig tree right after this discussion of the tragedy that occurred. When I was reading it this time around, I was reminded of the story about a man who had a fruit tree in his yard that wasn't giving any fruit. He tried everything he could think of and nothing seemed to make any difference. So, eventually he called a tree doctor. The tree doctor came and examined the tree, looked it all over very carefully. Then he took out three big spike nails and pounded them into the trunk of the tree. The homeowner was aghast. "Isn't that going to kill the thing?" To which the tree doctor responded. Well, those nails will shock the tree, and then it is going to either die, or start to bear fruit. One or the other. It can't just keep doing nothing."

When bad things happen in life, I think they are a little like the nails. They shock us. Some folks are driven away from God by the bad things they see or experience. And others are driven closer to God. When everything is fine, we tend to forget God. We tend to think we are managing our lives just fine thank you very much. We tend to forget our need for God. It is only when life becomes unmanageable, when our world is falling apart, that we realize how much we need the One whose loving kindness is big enough to enfold us and hold on to us through the storm. It's only when the world leaves us thirsty and hungry that we realize we need the true bread and the water of life.

The simple fact of the matter is that God did not create a universe-sized puppet show, where every last detail is manipulated to turn out a certain way. God created a universe with freedom, with possibility. The forces that create hurricanes are also the ones that create gentle breezes. There has to be the possibility of self-centered selfishness in order for there to be the possibility of generosity, kindness, thoughtfulness, self-sacrifice. One has to have experienced the darkness in order to comprehend the magnificence of the light.

That's not a very satisfying answer to the "why" question. But I have never gotten the impression that God expects us to understand. Quite the opposite. God says, My thoughts are higher than your thoughts. My ways higher than your ways. Instead God offers us comfort in the midst of sorrow, strength for the journey, and the promise that one day, all will be well.

I don't think we ever give up asking "why." I know I haven't been able to. Most of the time, my head hears the answer – but my heart is still breaking. Maybe that's because it is only the heart that is breaking that is opened up to be filled with the courage to act, to do what can be done. People have to care about something before they will get up to do something to address it. We don't need to be afraid of the pain of the world. We don't have to run away. We don't have to fix it either. We are just called to open our hearts, to let them be broken, even as God's heart is broken. That's when God can, and will, work through us to bring healing, and wholeness, to give pardon and peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.