

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 20, 2022 (3rd Sunday in Lent, Year C)
Luke 13:1-9
1 Corinthians 10:1-13

“Oh God, it happened again!” Sometimes that’s all we can say when we hear the news. “Oh God, no!” You can’t watch the news or scan the headlines on your computer these days without seeing the stories – someone dies in a snowmobile accident, a home explodes from a gas leak with everyone inside, a student at some college shoots another student, or worse! And those are just the most SENSATIONAL of any NUMBER of tragic and painful events that occur EVERY day, that trouble our hearts and raise questions in our minds. It’s SHOCKING when it’s someone we don’t even KNOW, in some other part of the country or part of the world. But when the news hits closer to HOME, it leaves us ... speechless.

We hear ECHOES of these events in today’s gospel reading: Some people are KILLED to TERRORIZE a nation, and some OTHERS are CRUSHED by a falling tower in a CONSTRUCTION accident. It sounds TOO familiar.

Some people approach Jesus and ask his OPINION about those two incidents, and raise the question: “Why? WHY do those kinds of things happen? Did they happen because the people involved were so WICKED that the tragedies were God’s JUDGMENT upon them?”

Now, let’s not be too HARD on them for asking that question. That was a pretty COMMON viewpoint among Jews at that time. And HONESTLY, many Christians STILL believe it to this DAY, that SUFFERING, whether the result of illness or tragedy or disaster, was a DIRECT CONSEQUENCE of sin and a clear SIGN of divine judgment.

Have you ever heard someone say, “They had it coming”? Or “Those people DESERVE to be poor because they’re lazy”? Yes, people STILL SAY those things. So, in some ways, we STILL operate with the same way of thinking.

But Jesus REJECTS that idea COMPLETELY. Were those killed by Pilate or those crushed by the tower WORSE sinners than those who survived? “Do you think they were worse offenders than all the OTHERS living in Jerusalem?”, he says. Jesus ANSWERS the question DIRECTLY, which you KNOW is UNUSUAL for Jesus: “NO, I tell you.” EVERYONE needs to repent – even pious Jews living in the holy city, and LUTHERANS living in MINNESOTA – EVERYONE needs to repent.

Jesus says that sin is NOT the cause of all suffering; sometimes BAD things just HAPPEN. And Jesus would KNOW. HIS life was FULL of suffering – did HE DESERVE it? And the lives of his DISCIPLES were full of suffering too – did THEY deserve it? But JESUS’ sorrow is OUR consolation--when he POURED out his life on the cross and took it UP again on Resurrection Morning

Does that mean that there’s NO PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY for ANY suffering? Of COURSE not. Chain smokers are more LIKELY to suffer from lung disease. Drunk drivers are more likely to have an ACCIDENT.

What Jesus DENIES is that GOD CAUSES people’s suffering, SINNERS or NOT, and EVERYONE’S a sinner. Think about this for a moment: What KIND of God would that BE? God doesn’t go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, and his hands on steering wheels. God is AGAINST ALL unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an INORDINATE amount of time DELIVERING people from illness. So, the ONE thing that should NEVER be said when someone dies is, “It’s the WILL of GOD.”

How many grieving believers have had their faith DESTROYED by someone saying, “They just didn’t PRAY HARD enough; she didn’t have enough FAITH for God to HEAL her.”?

After tragedies, people say things like: “You’re YOUNG, you’ll have ANOTHER baby,” or “God just needed another ANGEL,” or “God needed her MORE than we did,” or “He FINISHED everything

God needed him to do in this life.” Sometimes you hear that LAST one even after the death of a 20 year old — ALL God had planned for them in 20 years? REALLY? These are WELL-MEANING people, looking for SOMETHING, ANYTHING, to say, but they don’t realize how much their words ACTUALLY HURT. They need to STOP. JUST STOP.

Today, instead of thinking of tragedies as PUNISHMENT for the VICTIMS, many folks think of tragedies as TRIALS for the SURVIVORS. They appeal to our second reading today and say, “I know that God doesn’t give us more than we can HANDLE, but right now I FEEL like I’ve had more than I can TAKE.”

Let ME answer THAT directly: God does NOT CAUSE tragedies or disasters. Lamentations 3(:33) says, “For God does not willingly AFFLICT or grieve ANYONE.” That is NOT the God we know—the God of LOVE and MERCY, the God whose ways are revealed in the Bible, and whose nature is SUPREME and PERFECTLY revealed in the life and DEATH of Christ. A loving God does NOT CAUSE his children pain.

In my OWN life, I’ve endured such terrible pain and despair, been driven to the brink of taking my own life. If I were to believe that God had ARRANGED that to TEACH me something, that God had CAUSED that pain, I WOULD not, and COULD not, LOVE a God like that. I would HATE a God like that. We call FATHERS like that ABUSERS, so why would we attribute the very WORST of our HUMANITY to GOD?

That’s NOT the God I know. That’s not the God of JESUS. James 1 (vs. 13) says, “No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’ for God ... himself tempts NO ONE”. To the contrary, our reading from 1 Corinthians (10:13) says: “God is faithful, and he will not LET YOU BE tested beyond your strength.”

It DOESN’T say, “GOD doesn’t give us more than we can handle.” It’s NOT GOD; it’s LIFE, and LIFE DOES give you MORE than you can handle sometimes. It isn’t GOD that does the testing; SATAN tests us, LIFE tests us.

That verse goes on to describe what God DOES do. It says: “With the testing he will PROVIDE THE WAY OUT so that you may BE ABLE TO ENDURE IT.” Now THAT’S the God we know.

God doesn’t CAUSE tragedy, but he DOES help us get THROUGH it. God ISN’T a DETACHED OBSERVER of our suffering. God is IMMERSED in it WITH us, SHARING COMPLETELY our grief and pain. That’s the fundamental MEANING of the CROSS – that God SUFFERS WITH us.

Ten days after the death of his 24 year old son Alexander, who had crashed into Boston Harbor while driving in a terrible storm, William Sloane Coffin Jr. wrote these words: (Permit me this extended quote, it’s worth it.)

Many things can be said when a person dies, but there is at least one thing that should never be said.

The night after Alex died, I was sitting in the living room of my sister’s house outside of Boston when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking middle-aged woman carrying about 18 quiches. When she saw me she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying over her shoulder, “I just don’t understand the will of God.”

Instantly, I was up and in hot pursuit. (I knew the anger would do me good.) I said, “Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had had a couple of ‘frosties’ too many? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guardrail separating the road and Boston Harbor?”

He later reflected:

My consolation lies in knowing that it was NOT the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s was the FIRST of all hearts to break.

THAT'S the God we know.

Now, we may wish to start talking theology here and ask the age-old question called "theodicy": Why does God LET BAD things happen to GOOD people? COUNTLESS pages, and VOLUMES have been written trying to answer that "theodicy" question, but all totaled, the MOST we can say is this: "We DON'T KNOW." We don't know WHY bad things happen to good people.

But the BEST thing we can say is this: "God's is the FIRST of all hearts to break."

And the HEART of God we DO know. The HEART of God is JESUS, the COMPASSIONATE heart that lifted up the lowly and healed the brokenhearted. THAT'S the God we know.

Dear friends, when we suffer, "God's is the FIRST of all hearts to break." God desires that all his children would be WHOLE, in body and spirit. But WHEN we are broken, when LIFE BREAKS us, when the WORLD FALLS down around us, the promise of the CROSS...is that GOD HOLDS us, and that "WITH the testing he will provide the way OUT, so that you may be able to ENDURE it." Amen.