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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Lent 3, Series C
Saturday, March 19th, 2022
Sunday, March 20th, 2022

Sermon: Repentance
Text: Luke 13:1-9

Focus: Christ calls us to repent (turn away) from our sins.

Function: That they would return to God for mercy and grace instead of suffering judgment.

Structure: Multiple Stories

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... redeemed me... with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Why do bad things happen to people?

That question was the focus of my sermon last Wednesday when I preached about God's mercy in suffering. I asserted that disasters are *not* always signs that God is punishing us for our sins—although we cannot rule that out entirely. Nevertheless, human beings love to figure out fault. And it has become increasingly common for Christians to blame the victims for the tragedies that befall them.¹

Why did a major earthquake devastate the island nation of Haiti in 2010? According to televangelist and former presidential candidate, Pat

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/01/pat-robertson-blames-natural-disaster-victims/341489/>

Robertson, because they made a “pact with the devil” during the slave uprising against their French overlords in the 1800’s.²

Why did the Boxing Day Tsunami in the Indian Ocean kill nearly 200,000 people in 2004? I remember TV preachers of the day suggesting that it was because the people of Indonesia were primarily Muslim, and God was supposedly punishing them for rejecting Christ.

Why did God permit the 9/11 attacks against the United States? Jerry Falwell, the founder of Liberty University, claimed it was because we had become “a nation of abortion, homosexuality, secular schools and courts, and the American civil liberties union.”³

Why did Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005? According to John Hagee, because “New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that.”⁴ While Hagee later retracted his statement, I remember many

² <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/laplaza/2010/01/us-teleevangelist-pat-robertson-links-haiti-earthquake-to-pact-with-devil.html>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/19/september11.usa9>

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/01/pat-robertson-blames-natural-disaster-victims/341489/>

pastors suggesting that it was because of the prevalence of voodoo in their city that God supposedly pummeled New Orleans.

But there is nothing new about blaming the victims. When Jesus' disciples encountered a man born blind, they asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2, ESV).⁵ From the disciples' perspective, *somebody* must have done something terribly wrong for this man to suffer in this way? But Jesus told them they were wrong: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3).

In today's Gospel lesson from Luke 13, Jesus turns it up a notch in his teaching on suffering:

"There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish'" (Luke 13:1-5).

⁵ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

In our reading, the crowds told Jesus about a terrible fate that befell some Jews from Galilee. Apparently, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had murdered them at the very moment when they were going to worship at the Lord's Temple in Jerusalem.

We have no more information about this historical event than the scant details given in our Gospel reading, so we don't know for certain *why* Pilate carried out this grisly massacre. However, we do know that Pontius Pilate was infamous for his cruelty and was eventually recalled to Rome by the Emperor for that very reason.

We also know that Galilee was a hotbed of patriotic fervor and messianic uprisings. Around this time, there was a rebellion in Judea after Pilate took funds from the Temple treasury to pay for a new aqueduct in Jerusalem. This expenditure, while needed, caused an uproar because monies meant for God were used by a pagan ruler for secular purposes. So we may speculate that the murdered Galileans were Zealots killed in the insurrection. But history doesn't say.

Jesus' audience was rightly disturbed by this news, and they were probably asking the classic question of theodicy, "How could God let this happen?"

Jesus gave them the answer: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless *you* repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2-3). In other words, Jesus asserts that **we cannot blame the victims** or their supposed sin as the reason for their suffering. It's not our place to judge or make that determination, and God doesn't always explain his purposes.

Nevertheless, there is a message *for us* when these sorts of things happen: Watch out! Make sure that you're on the right path. Get right with God before he decides to bring disaster upon *you* because of *your* sins. Repent before it's too late! In other words, when bad things happen in the world, while it may not necessarily be God's punishment upon *those* people, it *does* serve as a warning to *us* people.

Jesus followed up with another otherwise unknown tragedy from the ancient world: a tower collapsed, crushing 18 people. (Some

postulate that this may have been a support tower for Pilate's aqueduct project.) Again, whatever caused the tower to fall, it serves as a warning to the rest of us: "But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).

God calls every person to repent—to turn from their sin and turn to Christ for mercy and grace. If you and I don't repent, then we'll be damned and doomed to eternal destruction. But that's not the end God desires for us. In Our Testament reading from Ezekiel 33, Yahweh tells the prophet that he has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). And from Jesus' parable of the fig tree, we discover God's patience and willingness to give us extra time to turn. Christ died on the cross to forgive sinners like us who repent of our sins.

So what sins do you need to stop committing right now?
"Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments" (SC).
Are you lax in worship and lazy about your prayers? Do you neglect the tithe? Do you trust in your money or science or the government to keep you safe instead of God? Do you obey your parents and submit to them?

Or have you abandoned your parents in their old age? Do you make stinging remarks about your friends or family? Do you harbor hatred in your heart? Do you abuse alcohol or drugs? Repent before disaster happens to *you*!

Are you having an affair? Are you sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend? Are you addicted to Internet pornography? Do you lust after members of the same sex with homosexual longing? Repent, lest something worse happen to you! Do you lie, cheat, and steal? Are you greedy and selfish? Do you take credit for other people's work? Are you a gossip? Do you covet your neighbor's house, wife, workers, or possessions? Then repent while you still can!

The pit of hell yawns wide open ready to swallow you up in its flames. Is that the way you want to go, or will you turn before it's too late?

Right now there is time to repent. "Behold, *now* is the favorable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). Now is the time to get right with God—to "check yourself before you wreck yourself." Jesus' parable of the fig tree (Luke 13:6-9) shows that God is patient

with sinners—up to a point. But God’s patience eventually will come to an end.

A Mormon friend once asked me if I thought he was going to go to hell because he belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). After a moment to reflect, I replied: “I don’t know if you’re going to go to hell, because you’re not dead yet. You’re still breathing, which means that there’s still time for you to repent and believe in the *real* Jesus of the Christian faith. But if you remain LDS, yes, you will go to hell.”

My friend nodded his head sadly. I wasn’t trying to offend him, but love required me to speak the truth (cf. Eph. 4:15). As God told the prophet Ezekiel: “If I say to the wicked, o wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand” (Ezek. 33:8).

Just like my Mormon friend, you may not appreciate being confronted for your sins today. I don’t like people pointing out my problems either. But as a Christian pastor, that’s my job: to serve as a

watchman on the tower, warning you to repent before the tower crumbles. Right now you're still drawing breath. But at the moment you die or Christ returns—whichever happens first—time will run out.

So before the clock runs down, turn from your sin and return to Jesus. Fall at the feet of the cross and cry out for mercy. And he will show you mercy. The same Jesus who died on the cross for your sins also prayed for your deliverance from sin. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Nor do we know why disasters natural and unnatural occur in this world. Why do some die and some live? Who can say except God—and he does not tell us?

So the next time disaster comes, let's not waste our breath trying to figure out who is to blame. As Gandalf says in *The Lord of the Rings*, “Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment.” Instead, may we commend ourselves—and others—to God in prayer, asking for his forgiveness and heeding his warning to repent—lest something worse happen to us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.