

Luke 13:1-9 “Leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine!”

Life has many questions that leave us searching for answers. Today, Jesus answers one of them through two tragedies and a tree. As we listen to the answer, please...

If there is any question in life that turns us all into philosophers, it’s the age-old question involving the problem of evil: “If God is good, why is there evil? Or, to put it another way, what can a good and gracious God intend by allowing calamities to fall upon his children?” Why the “bad guys” get theirs is something we can all understand. But when tragedy strikes the “good guys,” we get a bit uptight. “Why can’t God be fair?” we wonder. “Where is the justice in this?”

You may have asked a similar question in the aftermath of the recent terrorist bombings or in more recent days as the death tolls mount from Winter Storm Goliath...a bit like the group of people who appeared on the scene in our text for today, to tell Jesus of a similar tragedy that had just occurred in Jerusalem. ***Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.***

Apparently, these Galileans were in Jerusalem to carry out some religious vow they had made to offer special sacrifices. For certain sacrifices, the people were required to enter into the court of the priests at the temple, lay their hands on the sacrifice (to symbolize the transfer of sin onto the sacrifice), and while they were holding the animal, the priest would sacrifice it.

This was done in an area of the temple that no Gentiles were allowed into under penalty of death, so that they wouldn’t desecrate it by their presence. But that didn’t stop Pilate. For some reason that is not told us, Pilate sent his men into that area of the temple. Maybe these Galileans had incited some unrest in Jerusalem, or offended Pilate in some other way. But

whatever the reason, he sent some Roman soldiers on horseback who came trotting into the court of the priest and cut them down with the sword in the middle of their sacrifice.

When the Galileans in our text came to Jesus, they were interested in hearing his reaction to this heinous crime. Would he fill them in on why these Galileans were singled out for sudden and violent death? They piously wanted to understand why these particular people died in this tragic way.

Instead, the response they got may well have shocked them. ***Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”***

Yes it is true, sometimes violent people perish by violent means – the original Goliath, for instance, by David’s hand. Sometimes blatant sinners are struck down by God with blatant punishment. But it doesn’t *always* work that way. In fact, quite often, it’s just the opposite. Evil men survive while saints like Stephen, the great deacon of the early Church in Jerusalem, are stoned; the Apostles James and Paul killed by the sword, or St. Peter crucified upside down, while the cheering and jeering crowds go merrily on their way.

But that doesn’t mean there’s no warning to be found in tragedy. The warning is that ANY of us could be struck down at any minute, and that each of us needs to be prepared to “meet our maker,” as they say. Take a look: Jesus doesn’t answer the questions they no doubt were driving at like: why in Divine providence does God take some young and others old? Why do some die of so-called “natural causes” and others in attacks and accidents and atrocities? Why does God let people like Pilate and his soldiers desecrate the temple and dishonor religion?

These are questions that *they* wanted *answers* to because they kept thinking that people ought to be rewarded for *good* behavior and punished for *bad* behavior. Instead Jesus simply says, “Take heed, take warning! The same could happen to you!”

He even draws in another example to make the same point all the more forcefully. He said, **Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.**"

Don't miss the point here. Jesus is not saying you should live in fear of a tragedy. He is simply saying that if you don't repent, you'll die unprepared. You can't count on death-bed apologies. Oh, it does happen, as it did with the thief on the cross, and that thief is in heaven—praise God! But if you're planning on a deathbed conversion, you're playing Russian Roulette with your salvation—and you're going to lose. The Lord says, **I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation** (2Co 6:2). This is Jesus' message to us on the eve of another new year, another new year of time and grace.

But just in case we need the "repent" message to be a little clearer, he went on and told **this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"**

It is important to understand right from the start that the immediate fulfillment of what Jesus was talking about was Jerusalem. The **owner** of the vineyard is God the Father. The **vineyard** is Israel and the **tree** is Jerusalem. God had planted Jerusalem in the good soil of his special promised land. He had nurtured that city, giving it special treatment—better than any other place on earth, sending them his prophets, establishing his Temple there, providing a special priesthood and sacrifices to teach them about him. And then he even sent them his own Son - the **man** who took care of the vineyard.

But now after these three years of his own Son's preaching, the Father—the owner—still couldn't find any fruit. Even then the Son asked, **"Let me finish the last year of my ministry to this special city—then, if you still find no fruit, cut it down!"** You can hear the love in his voice, can't you? He would do *anything* so as to save his people. So the Son finished his ministry of digging and fertilizing, of preaching Law and fertilizing with the Gospel. Sadly, you know the outcome. Jerusalem didn't repent, and Jesus was the one who was **cut down**.

But that's how God operates, isn't it? We are the **trees** planted in the **vineyard** of his New Testament Church, fruitless left to ourselves. God's righteous law demands that the axe be laid to *our* roots, too. But the Son doesn't leave it to us. He steps in to lovingly prune with the law and fertilize with the Gospel. And then, willingly allows himself to be cut down.

Talk about injustice, just look at the cross. God punished the wrong guy! But that's how God operates. At the cross, God balanced the scale of justice. All the weight of all the sins of all the people in all the world was placed on him. Bad things happened to a truly and completely good man. And in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the good things of God were passed on to all the bad people of the world who repent and believe in him, people like you and me.

And now, after giving to us so lavishly, after caring for us so tenderly, he invites us so lovingly to blossom and flourish. This is his New Year invitation: **I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.** Brothers and sisters, stay in the Lord. Remain close to him in his Word. Trust in Jesus alone for forgiveness. And, by his grace, your repentant heart will blossom and flourish in the Father's vineyard this year, next year and forever. **AMEN.**