

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus seems to be mean. He certainly is challenging, is he not?

Some people ask Jesus about several people from Galilee, from Jesus's home territory, his home county, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

So, here's what we think happened: Some folks from Galilee, again, Jesus's own territory, like people from Kentucky are for us, or people from Louisville, folks from Galilee had been sacrificing a goat or sheep or some doves to God. This was what they were supposed to be doing, to show their devotion to God. And Pilate, the governor of that area, who is known to be a brutal tyrant, sends his henchmen, his militia men and has them killed, right there at the altar, with a sword or a spear or something, so that their blood mixes with the blood of the sheep or goat or doves that they had sacrificed there at that same place.

Kind of an icky story, icky way to die.

People come to Jesus and ask him "What about them?"

Also, people bring up these folks in Jerusalem where a tower fell on them and killed them. What about them?

Nowadays, we might ask the question, "Why? Why did God let such a bad thing happen?"

There are answers to that question, or at least responses, but we don't have time to get in to them today. We can do a Bible study on it sometime if you want. It'll take about four sessions.

But that's not the question people would have asked in Jesus's day. They would not have asked the question "Why?" They would have asked the question, "What?" "What did these people do to deserve what happened to them? What did they do to make God so angry that God would punish them by making Pilate send those henchmen to kill them in such an icky way. What did those people in Jerusalem do that God would punish them by having a tower fall on them and crush them?"

We don't ask that question nowadays. Or do we?

When you go walking down the street, or driving by a woman living in a tent underneath an overpass here in Louisville, is there not a little voice in the back of your brain? Maybe not. I will confess that there is a little voice in the back of my brain. It asks, "What did this woman do to land herself here, on the street? Did she drink too much alcohol? Did she do too many drugs? Was she sexually promiscuous? (We don't ask that question about the men, just the women.) Is she weak? Did she give in to a mental illness? Could she just not take it?"

This last, I have to say right now is a lie; a vicious lie from the nether pit of hell. People assume that mental illness is a weakness, that folks just can't hack it, when in reality, some of the bravest folks I know are dealing with mental illness. Mental illness is an illness, that can be treated, it can get better. Maybe not all the way better, but it can get better with help.

But ask these questions: What did she do? Because I want it somehow to be her fault. I want it to be something that she has done, which has caused her to be houseless, because if it's just random, if chaos can come down on her through no fault of her own, then chaos can come down on me through no fault of my own. And I can't have that. I need my illusion of control. My illusion of safety.

So I wonder what she did.

And beneath that wonderment, beneath that question is another voice that likes to stay hidden, so that I can tell myself that I am ultimately righteous. That voice gives

my step a little more spring, my car a little smoother ride, because it says, “If it’s her fault, and I’m not on the street, then somehow I am better.”

Remember that voice, for when you hear it again. We need to know who is speaking. “*Better.*”

Several years ago, some people from our own territory, and now I am talking about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, people who had attended our own seminary, Southern Seminary in Charleston, South Carolina, were studying the Bible and praying at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. They were doing what they were supposed to do, study and prayer are part of how we show our devotion to God. Then another person from our own territory, someone who was technically a member of an ELCA church, came in, sat there for an hour in the Bible study—plenty of time to think about it, and pulled out a gun, shot and killed nine people in cold blood.

What about them?

I can hear that voice. People in our own city of Louisville, our own territory, get shot. I can hear that voice though. That can’t happen to me. That’s not going to happen to me. Why not? Because I’m white.

And under that voice, the other voice, much softer, “Because I’m better.”

Mark that voice for when you hear it again. We need to know, that is the voice of Satan.

Jesus says, “Do you think that these Galileans were any worse sinners than other Galileans? Do you think these people from Jerusalem, from Charleston South Carolina, from Louisville that suffered in this way are any worse sinners than anybody else? No, absolutely not. But if you don’t repent,

And here, this is important, Jesus is not talking to us as individuals when he says this. He is talking to us in the plural, as communities, cities, states, nations, as a species. He says, “If you all don’t repent—*Metanoia* in Greek, *Meta*, for change, *noia*, for your mind—if y’all don’t change your mind, y’all’s attitude, y’all’s way of looking at the world, then this sort of thing is gong to happen again and again and

again and again, to you all. There will be shooting in your churches and synagogues and mosques and temples. Your own people will be doing the shooting.

This is what will happen if you are so afraid of chaos, so afraid of random ad things happening that you have to blame them on somebody else, if, in your fear and cowardice, you have to think of yourself as better.

But here is the good news. There is a power and a peace and a hope and a laughter and a love that is deeper than the chaos coming down, deeper than any random evil, deeper than the power of the gun, deeper even the depravity of the shooter. That power, that presence, that hope, that love has a name. Its name is Jesus, and Jesus loves you.

Then Jesus tells a story about a fig tree I hear from scholars that fig trees in Scripture represented the community, the nation. There was a fig tree that hadn't borne fruit in a long time. The owner of the vineyard suggests the sensible thing to do: Cut it down. If it's not bearing fruit, then it's taking up the soil, the room, the water, the time, the money, the resources that could e better used by other communities that are bearing fruit. Cut it down.

But the gardener says, "Wait, give it one more year Let me dig around at its roots and work manure into the soil. Then we'll see."

Jesus is merciful. He digs around our roots, the roots of our churches, the roots of our doctrine, the roots of our identity, the roots of our assumptions. That's not comfortable. It's challenging, it even sounds mean sometimes. But it's hopeful. It's so that we can bear fruit.

Because bearing fruit, showing Jesus to our neighbor, helping people who live on the street, reducing gun violence in our community, is fruit. It is as much a part of being a Christian as breathing is a part of being alive. Jesus has mercy. He challenges us so that we will bear fruit.

Change your mind. Change your way of looking at the world. Watch for the power, the life, the hope, the laughter, the love of Jesus at work around you. Become a part of it. Be a part of helping folks who are houseless, of making affordable housing available in Louisville. Be a part of reducing violence in the city. Be a part of feeding

people, hugging children, accompanying elders, smiling at strangers, praying for the world. Bear fruit.

Thanks be to God.