

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 13:1-9

“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” (Luke 13:2 N.R.S.V.)

Why Has This Happened to Me?

There is an old story about a farmer who had three sons; Don, Ron, and Little John. All of them had been very active in the church for a while, but then they had drifted away. Now it so happened that one day Don got bit by a rattlesnake. The doctor wasn't sure that he would recover. So the pastor was called in to pray.

The pastor prayed, “O wise and righteous Father, we thank Thee that in Thine wisdom thou didst send this rattlesnake to bite Don. He has drifted away and shown little interest in you. We trust that this experience will be a valuable lesson to him and will lead him to genuine repentance. And now, O Father, wilt thou send another rattlesnake to bite Ron, and another to bite Little John, and another really big one to bite their old man. For years, we have done everything we know to get them to get serious with thee. Thank you, O God, for rattlesnakes. Amen.” (Rev. Lang Yang as quoted by *Dynamic Preaching*, February 2016, pg. 56)

We don't know whether Don recovered from the snakebite or not. We don't know whether it helped him to turn back to God or not. What we do know is that there is no end of bad things, terrible things that happen to people.

The preacher in the story seemed to believe that God had sent the rattlesnake. I don't believe that God sends bad things. Yet at the same time, God is involved. God is all powerful and all knowing. So God has the power to intercede and stop bad things from happening. Yet time and again God does not.

Wars are fought. Planes are flown into skyscrapers. Mass shootings occur in schools. Families are torn apart. Babies are born with terrible birth defects. “Why, O God, Why?” we ask. How can a loving and all-powerful God allow such terrible things to happen to us?

Wouldn't it be great if we could go back to Bible times and ask Jesus that question? Actually it seems that someone did ask that question of Jesus. Our text from Luke does not contain the question, only the answer. It is like listening to only one side of a telephone conversation. We don't hear the question, but we can guess at it from Jesus' answer.

Perhaps someone said to Jesus, “When terrible things happen to people, it’s because they have done something wrong, isn’t it?”

The answer Jesus gives is not very satisfying. What we really want to know is why bad things happen to good people. Jesus does not answer that question at all.

It seems that there was a group of Gentiles who were worshiping God. They had just made a sacrifice to God when Pilate’s soldiers arrived and killed them all. Now listen, if there is any place that we should be safe and surround by God’s protection, it should be in God’s house. Right?

What a horrible way to die! So obviously there was something wrong with these Gentiles. Maybe they were just pretending to worship God, but their hearts weren’t really in it. Maybe they had done terrible things and they were hoping to get a quick forgiveness and skate on out of there.

Jesus says, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Can you imagine the blank look on all of their faces that day? They understood every word Jesus said individually. But the explanation didn’t make sense at all.

So now I imagine one of those gathered there that day, has “a light bulb over the head” moment. “Oh, so I get it. These Galileans, they were not Jews. They were not God’s chosen people. That’s why this terrible thing happened to them. Right?”

Jesus is shaking his head. He reminds them of the wall that fell on 18 people, killing them all. These were Jews. These were God’s chosen people. Yet they all died. Jesus goes on to say, “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

It sounds like Jesus needs to go back to school and learn some pastoral sensitivity. He needs to work on his bedside manner. This is just plain harsh! Besides which, he has not answered the question, “Why do bad things happen?”

Actually Jesus has answered part of the question. We just don’t like the answer. Jesus has said that there is no direct connection between how sinful we are and how much suffering we must endure. This isn’t the only place that Jesus said that.

In Matthew 5:45, Jesus says, “God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” In John 9, Jesus and the disciples encounter a man who was born blind. They ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” Jesus says, “Neither one.”

Now listen, these words of Jesus have been around for nearly 2,000 years now. So why is this still a question? Why is that when something bad happens, we still say, “What did I ever do to deserve this?”

Mostly it is a matter of control. We want to be in control. So if we can establish that bad things only happen to bad people then we can relax. We don’t have to worry, because we are good people!

The death of Jesus on the cross should put this way of thinking to rest for all time. Jesus was perfectly good and sinless. Yet he still had to suffer a terrible, painful death on a cross.

Jesus never does answer the question about why bad things happen to some people and not to others. Instead he says, those are the wrong questions.

Instead of asking, “Why is this happening to me?,” we might well ask, “Why not me?” Am I really so special, so good, so pure, that nothing bad is ever supposed to happen to me. We are all sinners. Romans 3:23 says, “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;”

When bad things happen, they remind us all the more of how many good things we have received. We have earned none of them, yet God still opens his hand to us.

The question is not, “Why is this happening to me?” but rather, “How will I respond?”

Jesus never promised that life would be easy for his followers. What he did promise was that he would walk with us through every difficulty. What he did promise was that he would never leave us or forsake us. What he did promise us was renewed faith, strength, grace, and love to endure whatever comes our way in life.

One of the most faithful responses I have ever encountered came from a pastor whose little daughter had been killed in a car wreck. His prayer was this: “Lord show me how you will use even this terrible thing for your glory.”

This pastor went on to say that he found that he was able to minister so much more effectively to those in crisis and grief, because of what he had gone through.

Let me be clear here. The pastor was not suggesting that the good that he was thus able to do, somehow made up for the bad of losing his daughter. Nothing can ever make up for the loss of a child. Instead, the pastor believed, and indeed found to be true, that God can and does bring good out of even the most awful things that happen to us.

Sometimes Jesus can come across as being rather harsh, or at least very blunt. This passage today is one of those times. Jesus says, don’t concern yourselves with how bad these other people must have been. Rather concern yourselves with your own walk with God.

Bad things are never an indication that God no longer loves you. Bad things are simply bad things. As such they are invitations to journey even more closely with God. For only in his strength can we endure. And in enduring with him, find victory.

“For I am convinced,” writes the Apostle Paul, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

Amen.