

“Fear-Giving Life”

October 11, 2020

Luke 13: 1-5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – 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.”

When I was a hospital chaplain at the University of TN Medical Center, the calls I dreaded most did not come from the emergency room, the psychiatric ward or even the morgue. They came from the pediatric floor, where little babies lay in cribs with bandages covering half their heads and sweet-faced children pushed IV poles down the hall.

One day I received a call to come sit with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was getting settled in the ICU unit. Earlier in the week, the girl had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she was covered with a rash. By the time she got to the hospital, her temperature was 104 and her lymph nodes were so large she could not drink a cup of water.

After numerous scans and blood tests, it was confirmed this little girl had AIDS. She was immediately placed in the Peds Intensive Care Unit under insolation. With numerous tubes and monitors trying to squeeze some life back into her.

I found her mother sitting under the fluorescent lights in the waiting room. She was staring at a patch of carpet – in front of her, with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look.

I slowly sat down beside her. She came to, and after some small talk she told me just how awful it was. She even told me why it had happened.

"It's my punishment," she said, "for marrying her idiot father." God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick."

She started crying so hard her voice came out like a shrill: "Now I'm supposed to leave him – but I can't.

We depend on him to put food on the table. And I guess I love him. Now I'm going to kill my own child!"

This was really hard for me to hear. So, I decided to forego reflective listening training and concentrate on remedial theology instead. "I don't believe in a God like that," I said. "The God I know wouldn't do something like that."

Later my supervisor told me, that the only problem with my response was that it messed with the mother's worldview at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or whimsical one.

I may have been able to say to her that a loving God was with her daughter's AIDS diagnosis – but at the moment she couldn't go there. If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. And she was even willing to be the reason.

At least that way she could get sometime of a grip on the catastrophe.
(Pause)

A prominent church in Texas recently paid for a billboard to ask commuters: "Is the coronavirus a judgment from God?" The Christian minister who leads a White House Bible study answered absolutely yes.

He argued that the disease is "God's consequential wrath on our nation. And warned "all-natural disasters can ultimately be traced back to sin."

Even some who don't affiliate with organized religion, such as my friend in St. Paul. "It could be a sign, like 'hey, get your act together' – I don't know." He says he believes in God but doesn't consider himself religious. "It just seems like everything was going in an OK direction and all of a sudden you get this coronavirus thing that happens, pops out of nowhere."

One recent poll reports that some 44 percent of Americans say the pandemic – is a "wake-up call" from God and "signs of coming judgment."
(Pause)

Even those of us who claim to know better react the same way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what did we do wrong.

We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain, hoping we can stop causing it.

What this tells us: is that we are less interested in truth than consequences. What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives. (*Barbara Brown Taylor*)

But there is a God problem here – when we try to explain why evil and suffering exist in the world.

The dilemma is: “Why do terrible things happen in a world governed by an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God?”

How can God simultaneously possess all three of these qualities and yet allow bad things to happen to good people all the time in horrible ways.

The Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg commented once: “If there is a God that has special plans for humans, then He has taken very great pains to hide His concern for us.”

Some people came up and told Jesus about the Galileans Pilate had killed- while they were at worship, they were mixing their blood with the blood of the sacrifices on the altar.

The conversation went something like: Jesus responds, “Do you think those murdered Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, not at all. Because unless you turn to God, you, too, will die.

And those eighteen in Jerusalem the other day, the ones crushed and killed when the Tower of Siloam collapsed and fell on them – Do you think they were worse citizens than all other Jerusalemites? No, not at all.

Like the same shrill he says? “Unless you turn to God, you, too, will die.”

Luke does not explain the motive of those who were upset about the Galileans. The implication is that those who died deserved what they got - or at least that is the question Jesus seems to suggest. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” (Hmmm. I’m not so sure that is what Jesus is talking about.)

It is a tempting calculation that solves a lot of problems.

1. It answers the riddle of why bad things happen to good people: they don’t. Since bad things only happen to bad people.
2. It punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone else.
3. It gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction.

It is a tempting calculation, but Jesus won't go there. "No," he tells the crowd, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

"No", Jesus says, "there is no connection between the suffering and the sin. But unless you repent, you are going to die too."

It is not helpful to spend too much time trying to interpret this piece of the good news. As far as I can tell, it is meant not to give a reason - but to disarm it.

Jesus touches the panic they have inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them. And of course, they are terrified. And they have searched their hearts for some inkling of why? They lie awake at night making lists of their mistakes.

It doesn't seem like Jesus supports their illusion that they can protect themselves in this way, but he does seem to embrace their fear and vulnerability.

You see, it is not a bad thing for you to feel the full fragility of your life. It is not a bad thing to count your sins in the dark – not if it makes us turn toward the light. That is what Jesus wants for us.

Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing.

I am going to believe – that the torn place your fear has opened up inside you is a holy place. You might want to look around while you're there. Pay attention to what you feel.

It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

Depending on what you want from God, this may not be the good news - you want to hear. I doubt seriously that it sounded like good news to the mother in the waiting room.

But for those of us who have discovered that we cannot make life safe nor God tame, it is good news. The only thing we can – do is turn our faces to the light.

Harold Kushner (famous Rabi author of Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People) said: "Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us ... But we can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on

them... A better question would be “Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?”

Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame.

But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. At least that is what I am trying to do. Walk in the light.

Amen.

(Credit to Barbara Brown Taylor, Rabbi Harold Kushner, Eugene Peterson

The AP-NORC poll of 1,002 adults was conducted April 30-May 4 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population.)