

Rev. Bill Masciangelo
Third Sunday of Lent – 7 March 2010
Luke 13:1-9

Questions, Answers and Being Fruitful

Terrorism...it is still with us. It has been quiet for a few months...but a day does not go by where we don't read or see on television about another suicide bomber going into a marketplace. Our memories still remember the terrorist bombing of the train in Madrid, Spain and I hope we never forget 9-11 in our own country.

It is only natural for compassionate people like you and me to be filled with anger, worry and raise our voices against these senseless acts. And then, of course, there are the questions, the forever haunting questions: **Why did this happen? What did these people ever do to deserve this?**

I personally do not have an answer to these questions. I hope you were not looking for that answer this morning.

But there are many folks here and in this world who cannot live without some answers. **There has to be an answer!** They would rather have a simple answer than no answer at all. And so, they are carried away by the first answer that blows in the wind.

Remember what some of the most prominent religious sages said when 9-11 happened: ***"God is judging America. God is punishing America. The crashing towers of New York City is God's wake up call."*** And many swallowed these explanations hook, line and sinker. **Did you?**

This is not new. Bad things happened over 2000 years ago when Jesus was walking the face of the earth; things similar to what happened to Americans on 9-11 and things similar to what happened in Spain just a few years ago.

Two such tragedies are revealed in our scripture text for today. The **slaughter of innocent** Jews while they were offering their sacrifices in Jerusalem, and the **unfortunate deaths** that occurred when the tower of Siloam came crashing down.

Just like today, **so it was back then**, explanations started circulating among the community about the reason it all happened; **including the simplistic idea that these people were being punished for their sins.**

WRONG EXPLANATION

Punishment for their sin? That is always the classical religious answer, isn't it? It wasn't the first time Jesus had to deal with this **presumptuous attitude**. Remember, how the religious leaders brought a blind man to him and raised a similar question: ***"Who is responsible for this man's disease? Is he responsible or are his parents responsible?"*** Jesus set them all straight on that occasion, and he does it again in the narrative before us today.

He begins with a reasonable hypothesis. ***The sin of these victims is not greater than your sin.*** The logical conclusion to that thinking is this: **If these victims died because of their sin, certainly**

you would be among them and you would not be standing here talking about how sinful they were. Hmmm...bet that got their attention.

WEAK EXPLANATION

There is another possible explanation for this tragedy. The answer is not explicitly spoken in the narrative, **but** the details of the narrative point logically in that direction and it is difficult to argue against it. What is that?

These people died because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time, just like the people who died in the World Trade Center were at the wrong place at the wrong time; just like the people who died in the train bombing in Madrid were at the wrong place at the wrong time.

That of course is a weak explanation and certainly not a satisfactory one for most of us. **But it may be the best answer we can offer from our human perspective without sounding arrogant and spiritually superior.** And, while it may not be a complete explanation, it does provide, as you shall see, a backdrop against which **Jesus can reveal an important message** for those who are spared the tragedy.

Actually we are left without any explanation for why these tragedies happened. And perhaps the reason for that is because we have asked the:

WRONG QUESTION

Sometimes we become confused on issues because we cannot see the forest from the trees. This happens with regard to the tragedies in our scripture lesson today and it happens in the context of the many tragedies that have and are befalling us as a nation.

When we ask the **wrong questions**, we are going to naturally come up with the **wrong answers**. **To ask why** innocent Jews were slaughtered by Pilate while doing sacrifice is the wrong question? **To ask why** innocent bystanders were crushed when the Tower of Siloam fell is the wrong question. **To ask why** 3000+ Americans died in New York several years ago, **and why** 200+ Spaniards died in Madrid is the wrong question.

I will leave the question **“why”** for the spiritual sages who have been working on this puzzle for thousands of years. But let's take a look at the lead Jesus gives us to follow.

It is clear that **Jesus does not direct his energies in this narrative toward answering the question of why these tragedies happened.** He does take the time to expose a wrong explanation but then he **quickly moves into the mode of raising another more important question.**

RIGHT QUESTION

The right question for the survivors of tragedy whether ancient or contemporary is not a philosophical one, but a very practical one. In the wake of tragedy it is not so important that we know why. In the wake of tragedy the real question is: **“What are we going to do?” How is the tragedy going to change our lives?**

RIGHT ANSWER

There may be any number of ways that tragedy might change our lives. Tragedy might **make us bitter**. Tragedy might **fill us with fear**. Tragedy might **immobilize us**. But Jesus prefers a different kind of affect. **Jesus wants tragedy to bring about a positive change in our lives; or as stated in verse 5; repentance.**

RIGHT REASON

And why does Jesus want us to repent? Good question! Verse 5 gives us the answer: Let me restate it in its positive form. *“Repent so that you will not die after the same manner as those victims who died at the hand of Pilate. Repent so that you will not die after the same manner as those victims who were crushed by the tower of Siloam.”*

If you read carefully this text, you will note that Jesus is **not highlighting the fact of death in these two tragedies but the manner of death.**

How did these poor souls die? They **died suddenly and un-expectantly** before they were able to finish their business. In the first case we even know what kind of business the victims were engaged in; they were in the process of **offering sacrifice at the temple**. But before they could complete their mission, their lives were snuffed out. **They died with unfinished business.**

That is why Jesus wants us to repent. **He does not want us to die with unfinished business hanging over our heads.** He knows that we will eventually die, but he does not want us to die like the victims in these tragedies; **so, he bids us repent while there is time.**

GETTING SPECIFIC

Now, let me say parenthetically that there are basically **two kinds of repentance**. One kind of repentance is that of repenting from unbelief. This is the kind of repentance that takes place when we become Christians. **And then there is the kind of repentance in which we repent for being unfruitful Christians.**

That is the repentance which Jesus is calling the people to in this narrative. **He is calling them to repent of their unfruitfulness.**

How do I know that Jesus is talking about the second kind of repentance? Because of the parable that follows. That parable **is all about fruitfulness** or to be more specific in the case of the proverbial fig tree; **the lack of fruitfulness**. This parable naturally follows the narrative that goes before and highlights the kind of repentance which Jesus is challenging his followers to effect.

At first it appears to be a bad news parable leading only to a bad news message. The orchard owner plants a fig tree and nurtures it in the most aggressive way possible. After three years the tree has failed to produce. **So the farmer tells his caretaker to cut it down.**

Here is where the bad news stops and the good news begins. **The caretaker pleads for one more year, and one more year is granted.**

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

And friends that, is the light in which I want you to see all the tragedies that are unfolding before us.

Do not look at these tragedies as God punishing sinners. Do you look at them as unfortunate events in which people are in the wrong place at the wrong time and they end up dying **suddenly and un-expectantly** with **unfinished work** waiting to be finished and see these events as events in which we may very well be the victims **but for the grace of God**.

And in the context of the tragedy, instead of asking the question “why”, ask this question: **“What am I going to do? What am I going to do with the realization that it was not me who was in that tower, that it was not me in that train or in the towers? What am I going to do with the wonderful fact that I am still alive, still healthy and breathing good North Carolina air?”**

Moreover, **what am I going to do** about the unfinished business that is hanging over my head? What am I going to do with the **gracious benevolence** offered to me by the great God who walks amongst the vineyard of my life and says; **‘One more year Sally, one more year Bill, one more year Lee?’ What am I going to do now?”**