

“God Moves...Into our Bread Basket”
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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church
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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.”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Apparently, just before today’s story, Pontius Pilate has been at it again. What Pilate has done is all the talk in town. The biblical record is not totally clear, but if we read between the lines, it looks like Pilate has instigated another brutality. And this time, against a group of men who had come down from the Galilee region, to worship in Jerusalem. Evidently, they were offering their animal sacrifices at the temple and the Roman ruler had them executed – right there in the holy place - and their blood and the animal blood mixed together. It looked like a scene from a Quentin Tarantino movie. Any group killing like this is too horrible for words, but this execution seems to have been directed by the prefect of Judea, Pilate himself. Like the atrocity at the New Zealand mosque two weeks ago – the recent Jerusalem violence has everybody talking. Every network, every hair salon, every diner – this is all anybody can talk about.

When there is this much horror and this much talk, the question eventually turns to “why”. *“Why these worshippers? Other Galileans were in town in the last month. Was it provoked? Or, or was it God’s punishment for something they did?”* That’s where some people go. Some people believe that bad things happen to bad people – so some were speculating about what kind of rotten people those Galileans might have been. And, well, it does say, right there in Proverbs, that *“Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous.”*¹ So, if this kind of misfortune landed on them – it stands to reason that they must have been pretty rotten sinners. As part of the news and gossip around the tragedy and the killing, some people were wondering what the victims had done to anger God, causing this misfortune to fall on them.

Well, as this back and forth exchange is taking place near the temple, somebody in one gaggle recognizes Jesus, the great teacher. Jesus of Nazareth is just over there, holding court. So, they approach and ask Jesus, about the slaughter of the Galileans and tell him how they are making sense of the tragedy – assuming that the victims must have had it coming. Jesus says to 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.”

What an odd response. *“They were not worse sinners than other Galileans and oh, by the way you need to repent or die.”*

Then Jesus reminds them of another recent tragedy. The aqueduct, just south of the city, was guarded by a tall stone tower. One day, when a group was at the Tower of Siloam, something happened, maybe at first it was just one rock that dislodged, but before you knew it, the whole stone tower crashed to the ground. And, when the rescue efforts were complete, the total body count was eighteen citizens of Jerusalem – dead. *“Why them and not you? Why was your neighbor – two doors down, with two small children, why was he one of the victims, and not that dishonest sheep trader who lives in the house between you?”*

There just seems to be no rhyme or reason:

- The first tragedy, the killings – the victims were not from around here, and they were victims of human evil.
- The second tragedy, the tower falling – the victims were from here in Jerusalem and they were victims of a freak accident. How do we understand?

So, Jesus reminds them of the local tragedy, their friends and neighbors – and says, *“do you think that they were worse offenders than others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”*

¹ Proverbs 13:21 NRSV

Are you helped by Jesus' answer here? Sometimes people die because of human evil, sometimes people die because of natural disaster or unfortunate accident. They were not better or worse than anybody else – stuff happens. But, if you don't stop your sinning, you are going to die just like they did.

I'm confused. Sometimes, the implication of scripture is so crystal clear, and our job is to bend our lives to the clear proclamation of God's claim on our lives. But then, sometimes, it is not so clear. Well, like today.

So, I'm taking a stab at what I think this might mean for us. Other interpretations are surely valid, but here is my best shot at what Jesus might be telling us in the story of the two tragedies. I think what Jesus is telling us is – *"Your sin is standing in the way of your purpose"*.

We all die. At some point, we all die. But some people die before they had a chance to live out their purpose in this world. Accident or disease or war or evil cuts some lives short. These tragedies happen in good families and rotten families. *"Ran falls on the just and the unjust alike"*, Jesus said.² And, while untimely death is not a result of sin. Sin may just be the way to an untimely death. That is, some people do not fulfill their divine purpose if they live to be 100. If someone spends their years in pursuit of greed and selfishness instead of their ordained purpose, they can live to be crinkly and old and still die too early because what they could have produced is left undone.

Jesus said, *"...unless your repent, you will all perish just as they did."* I think he means that you too will die before your purpose is fulfilled.

The reason that I think this is a reasonable interpretation is because of the parable Jesus tells next. Jesus says,

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So, he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'"

What is the purpose of a fig tree? Well, the primary purpose is to produce figs. The tree may have been doing some other okay things, providing shade for workers or whatever - but the reason the man planted a fig tree on his property is to get figs. If the tree is not fulfilling its purpose, then it is just a waste of soil. *"Cut it down!"*

There is a clear word of judgement here. You were put on this earth for a reason. God granted you the gift of breath and capacity. You have creativity sparks that live in you because you are made in the image of God. You are not an accident. You were planted for a purpose just as surely as a landowner plants a fig tree for a purpose. So, are you living into the fullness of who God created you to be? Are you a partner with God in blessing and loving and restoring this creation – or are you a waste of good soil? Be

² Matthew 5:45

clear, there is judgement in this parable. God is calling us to repent – to get serious about producing the fruit we are called to produce.

Quoting Carlyle Marney often requires cleaning up his language, but the great Baptist preacher from two generations ago said, *“We like to keep Jesus hovering somewhere between heaven and earth, because we know, that if he ever gets in our bread basket, he will raise heck with us.”*³

That’s what it feels like if I think too long about whether or not I’m living fully into my purpose - when I wonder if Jesus thinks of my life as a waste of good soil. In the quiet inventory of the Lenten season, it is the most haunting part of my quiet moments. I see visions of who I was created to be. Some half days, I have lived like a fully alive child of God. Some hours of some days I have laughed with the children, blessed the broken, run on the treadmill, kept my devotional time, helped the helpless, produced from my creativity, and been a worthy friend. But there are more days than I want to admit, that I just ate Cheetos, bought stuff I didn’t need, and pouted because others were not blessing me like I hoped. Far too many days are spent in a betrayal of my purpose and I know that God is fed up with me not producing the figs I was put here to produce. Sin is standing in the way of my becoming who God created me to be. It could feel hopeless if not for the end of the parable.

Our story ends with a marvelous biblical theme. Throughout scripture, the people of God get less judgement than deserved. There is often some window of second chance.

- Adam and Eve are told, *“if you eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, you will die.”* But then the punishment is real, but less. Toil, awareness of their nakedness – but they don’t die.
- In another Genesis story, God is fed up with the sinfulness of the people and God declares the destruction of the earth – all of it, but then saves Noah and his family.

And in our story today, the furious landowner has declared that he’s had it. For three years he has been looking for the fig tree to do what it was put here to do and still – no figs! *Cut it down!* – he says to the gardener. But the gardener appeals, *“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”*

The judgement is real, but by God’s grace, you and I have been given another chance to produce the fruit that God has planted us here for.

In an amazing act of grace, God has said, *“Okay, I will wait and see how those people at Second-Ponce respond to another chance to really get serious about doing what I put them here to do.”*

³ My friend James Manley quoted this to me often. He and Marney were friends. I can’t find the line in Marney’s writings.

This is part of the gift of Lent. We are invited into a season of reflection where we ask the big questions – questions about meaning and purpose and destiny. You and I were planted in this garden for a reason. In God's infinite creativity, God made you and made you for a purpose.

What does that call on your life look like to you? What do you need to do next, or stop doing, to move you closer to the purpose that God is speaking into your life?

That is the invitation. What is the next step? Is it time for you to join this church and invest yourself with others who are trying to live more faithfully? Is it time for you to repent, publicly or privately, for the ways you betray God and God's purpose for your living? Perhaps you have never trusted God with your life at all. Until you are ready to live in the model and love of Christ, you are just making laps anyway. Saying "yes" to following Jesus is the first step to living out your purpose. I don't know what your first step looks like, but I'm praying that you will get serious about it – the landowner has appealed for you to get one more chance.