



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Lent 3
Year C**

Suffering and Punishment

[RCL]: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Odds are that a quick scan of the commentaries and preaching resources written on Luke, chapter 13, would produce a common refrain: “Be careful with this passage!”

The warning is a good one, as this passage causes the faithful to ask some of the most common and complicated questions in all of Christendom. They are questions that virtually everyone who has experienced suffering or loss has considered: where is God in this?

Even more poignant are the related questions: Why is there so much suffering in the world? Is suffering inextricably linked to behavior? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Then, there are the most pointed questions of all: Does God cause suffering; and is suffering a form of Divine punishment?

In his short but profound book, entitled *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis considers these questions and has this to say: “The existence of suffering in a world created by a good and almighty God... is a fundamental theological dilemma and perhaps the most serious objection to the Christian religion.”

For 2,000 years, preachers and scholars alike have searched for a reasonable, logical, and erudite answer for the problem of suffering in Christian theology. From Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, to more contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth and Dorothee Sölle and others, much ink has been spilled attempting to offer a working hypothesis for the problem of suffering—and each time, the hypothesis comes up short.

Thus, engaging with Luke 13 is to enter an important conversation that can, at times, feel a bit crowded. Although theologians make admirable attempts to make sense of the complexity of human experience in the presence of the Living God, they too can drift into esoteric “head space,” falling in love with words and language and ideas, while leaving unattended the very real pain and brokenness of those who dared utter these difficult questions in the first place.

Even so, amidst all of its snares and dangers, to those who have been battered and bruised by the changes and chances of this life, Luke 13 offers an important word of nourishment.

The context of the passage is this: Word reaches Jesus that Pilate has made a religious sacrifice to the Emperor—who was often considered a kind of demigod in those days—and as a part of that burnt sacrifice, he slaughtered a gathering of Galilean Jews and placed their remains on the sacrificial pyre.

And as if that is not horrifying enough, at the same time that Jesus hears of Pilate's treachery, news arrives that a tower in Siloam has fallen, crushing eighteen people.

The crowd who relayed this horrible news to Jesus was burning with the same question that has echoed throughout Christendom for 2,000 years: "Why did this tragedy happen to these people?"

We've heard this question asked before elsewhere in Scripture: The Gospel of John asks the same question in a different way, as Jesus is asked about a man born blind: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?"

In other passages, well-intentioned but inadequate answers to the problem of suffering are suggested. Take, for example, the Book of Job, as Job's so-called friends gather in the wake of Job's terrible string of suffering and say well-meaning but dumb things like, "You need to seek God," or "It could be worse," or "God's punishment is less than you deserve."

Even today, it is difficult to pick up a newspaper or turn on the television without encountering vivid and often excruciating details of the latest tragedy that has befallen innocent victims. "Why has this terrible thing happened to such innocent people?" we often ask.

One of the most basic and widely-accepted rules of modern science is that every demonstrable effect is derived from a cause. We have transposed this equation onto everything from religion to sports to politics to the economy—you name it, we human beings love trying to explain it!

And so, things from as simple as a paint scrape on a new car to suffering as profound and heart-wrenching as a divorce or an ominous diagnosis, or even the death of a loved one, can cause us to ask the question, "What did I do to deserve this?"

In many ways, this search for answers is an indispensable part of our humanness.

From the depths of despair, there are times when *any* explanation is better than nothing at all.

But as the crowd asks Jesus the question of who or what is to blame for these tragedies, Jesus cannot be clearer: Those who died were no better or worse than we are. Rather, Jesus says, we have all made mistakes and lost sight of God's will for our lives, and we are all sinners.

What's more, although Jesus insists that the relationship between sin and suffering is not causal—that is, God does not cause us to suffer *because* of our sin, Jesus also reminds us that *sin itself* can cause us to suffer. There is no question that Pilate's murderous deeds—as well as the horrific actions perpetrated by today's tyrants—are sinful. And sin has consequences.

Destructive behaviors, violence, the lust for power, and the quest for vengeance and retribution lead to much suffering in the world. The Church is called to speak out in opposition to these forms of suffering, and to do all in its power to combat them.

But with all of that said, what sense can be made of the parable of the fig tree? Why does Jesus tell that particular parable, and why does he do it here?

Oftentimes, parables are treated as a kind of allegorical “mad lib,” inserting familiar names and ideas into the text, then reading it as a coherent moralistic story of our own invention. With that equation, it becomes easy to read this parable as though it were the angry and vindictive God being placated by Jesus meek and mild.

But what if it’s not quite that straightforward?

Humans, both ancient and modern, hold “fairness” as an important value. Fairness, in a moralistic sense, is often defined as receiving rewards for doing good and receiving punishment for doing evil. When we hit our targets at work, or make our grades at school, we expect a little gratitude, or maybe even a bonus. In the same way, when we fail to hit the target or earn the grade, we might expect some sort of ramification or punishment.

This concept of fairness is at play in the parable of the fig tree. The landowner says what most of us have come to believe about fairness: “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?”

In other words, it hasn’t met its mark or lived up to its potential, and it’s affecting my bottom line, so it has to go.

But the gardener proclaims another possibility: “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.”

Perhaps this parable is a reminder that God operates, not on our conventional conceptions of fairness and causes and effects; but rather, God operates on contrarian wisdom—patience, faithful tending, and hopeful expectation.

Rather than certainty; rather than providing a recipe for putting an end to human suffering; rather than offering a panacea that would make the world turn on blissful peace and harmony, Luke 13 offers a word of good hope: God is still tending the garden.

God is still working in and through God’s people to bring light and life, love and peace to a broken and sinful world.

And in that, there is indeed hope for us all.

Amen.

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