

Suffering and Sin: Related or Not?
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
February 28, 2010
2nd Sunday in Lent

Texts: Isaiah 55:6-9; Luke 13:1-9

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 55:6-9

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷ let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

New Testament Lesson: Luke 13:1-9

¹ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ 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? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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?" ⁸ He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Introduction

In spite of bumper stickers that proclaim "No Bad Days;" in spite of all the prophets of prosperity that proclaim that God wants us to be beautiful and successful; bad things do happen to both the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous, saint and sinner.

There always seem to be those among us who are quick to claim that the reason for disasters – whether natural or the result of human error or intention – are because of a nation's sinfulness, or because of the political party that is in office, or because the afflicted didn't have sufficient faith, so we shouldn't be surprised when we hear such claims. But what is the truth? How do we who desire to be faithful respond when faced with the Haiti's, and now the Chile's, and the tolls of wars and poverty, drought, and floods...a list of afflictions that seem never-ending?

The question is as old as the earliest books within the canon of Scripture; it was addressed in that incredibly powerful morality play we know as the Book of Job. In today's text, we find it addressed to Rabbi Jesus by those who also wondered about such things.

"So," Jesus was asked, "what about these recent incidents of human suffering? Were the sufferers worse sinners than the rest of us?"

Without any apparent hesitation, Jesus responds with a firm "NO!" In essence, Jesus is telling us that it is futile to seek to apply a mathematical ratio to suffering and sin.

Accordingly, for those of us who in this day and age who still ponder such things, Jesus is saying "STOP IT! Your question is without merit."

At the same time Jesus -- in the prophetic tradition of his predecessor John the Baptist, and his ancient prophetic colleague Isaiah -- did not let his questioners off the hook, did he?

Jesus didn't ask, "Why do you ask such silly questions?"

Jesus didn't tell his listeners, "Don't worry, be happy,"

Jesus didn't tell the crowd to purchase his latest book on the secret to happiness.

Jesus didn't say, "Whether persecuted or not, you are all going to get to heaven."

Jesus did say, "**unless you repent, you will all perish ...!**"

Ouch! Couldn't Jesus have been a bit more compassionate with their listeners?

Apparently not.

So, what exactly was Jesus and his predecessors calling their contemporaries to do?

More importantly, what are they calling us to do today, in the here and now?

They use just one word, but oh what a powerful word it is.

"**REPENT!**" they plead, beg, whisper, shout, over and over.

And why?

Because of their profound conviction that any of us -- and all of us -- at any time, in any place, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, have a narrow window of time to respond.

Such prophetic individuals and voices don't tend to think of time as being *chronological*, meaning "x" number of minutes, hours, days, or years, they think of time as "windows of opportunity" to respond to God's will and God's ways; windows that don't stay open forever.

"**Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near,**" is the way Isaiah said it.

"**It's like a man planting a fig tree,**" is the way Jesus put it.

The gardener may plead with his master to give the tree a bit more time to produce figs, but there will come a time that – if it doesn't – it will be cut down."

Contemporary prophetic figure Billy Graham calls it "The Hour of Decision."

In the Evangelical and revivalistic world it is thought of as the time to make a decision for Christ, confess one's sins, and be *saved* from eternal damnation.

Jesus and his prophetic predecessors likely weren't as individualistically oriented as contemporary evangelists often seem to be.

Oh sure, they knew it took individual decisions to contribute to meaningful collective actions, but they had an image in mind of God's kingdom as having collective and eternal consequences for all of humanity.

They knew full well that the human tendency is to think of me, mine, ours.

In other words they weren't naive idealists.

If anything, they were realists of the first order, wading into places and situations where the timid would not dare to go to exhibit and demand justice for all; to touch those the societies of their day labeled untouchable; to rattle the cages of the "powers that be" even if it meant that their own lives would be foreshortened.

So, what then are we to hear from today's Scripture lessons?

We are to hear that we are to stop *obsessing* about the correlations between sin and suffering, and start *behaving* as though each and every one of us has a role to play in attending to God's will for all of life – because we do!

That's the Gospel truth, folks.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear and then heed this truth.

To God be the glory.

Amen.