

Sermon on Luke 13:1-9  
Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Have you ever wondered *what God is really up to* as you look at the world around you and the mess that we humans have made of things? We have an economy that has mostly fallen apart, a government that doesn't seem to be working (much less leading), people are deeply divided about the approach that we should take to fix the mess, and on top of all that, we have had two recent natural disasters (great earthquakes first in Haiti and next in Chile) which have devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and provided a test for the world's compassion. The first question people ask is whether God had any part in causing the earthquake – are natural disasters a vehicle for God's work in the world, to send us a message that we humans are going in the wrong direction? (The answer depends on who you ask – if you ask televangelist Pat Robertson you'll get one answer, and if you ask me, or most any Lutheran pastor, you'll get another!) The second question people ask is “what's God going to do about this mess?” Not only the natural disasters that cause so much death and destruction, but also about this great human-made mess that we have made of God's creation. Those are fundamental human questions at the heart of our thinking about who God is and what God does and is calling *us* to do. We have given a fancy name to this process of “thinking about God” – we call it *theology*. And you don't have to be a seminary professor sitting in some religious institution to do it. For we all have these questions, from the smallest child to the wisest leaders of the Church. *Why did God do this? DID God make this happen? Is God listening when we cry out to him? Is God going to do anything about this, and where do you and I fit in?*

These are great questions to be thinking about this second Sunday in Lent, because Lent is the season for reflecting on God, our relationship with God and each other, and what God through the Word is calling us to do. Oftentimes in the Church we are thinking about the big picture: about God's love and care for the Creation, and our human fall into sin and God's plan for salvation (the sin and grace question), and how we may attain eternal life. Then something comes up: there is a great human disaster (like a flood, a fire, an earthquake, or a war), or an event in our lives (we get sick, lose a job or a home, or a loved one dies) – which brings all these questions home at once with great urgency. And sometimes these events lead us to totally different answers than we had before they happened.

This is what the gospel story is about today. Jesus was preaching to crowds of people in Galilee who gathered in increasing numbers to hear what he taught about God, and a totally new way of thinking about God and neighbor. In this

passage, some of those in the crowd told Jesus about some Galileans whom the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate had had killed. They must have been religious pilgrims, because their blood had even been mixed with the blood of the animals they had brought to sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem. The old ways of thinking about such a terrible atrocity would first ask “what bad things had these persons done to make them deserve such a terrible fate” and “let’s get revenge against those heathen Roman occupiers.” A common question and a common response.

But Jesus challenged this old way of thinking. First he said, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” (No, of course not!) Jesus also mentioned another local disaster, a recent construction accident that killed 18 people when a tower collapsed on them – did they deserve that? No, they didn’t deserve to die either. Jesus directly challenged that old, human folk-tale thinking that tries to find meaning in every death, and so concludes that if somebody dies a terrible, tragic death they (or their parents or ancestors) must have committed some terrible sin in the past. Otherwise there could be no meaning, no sense in such a death. No, Jesus said, such tragic deaths aren’t caused by some sin the victims committed, “*but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*”

Wow! What did Jesus mean by that? Let’s unpack the word “repent”. We use this word a lot in the Church. We usually think of a prophet in the desert, like John the Baptist, saying “repent, sinners, or you are going to die!” We kick off the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday with a call for repentance and prayer, so we get on our knees to repent by confessing our sins. But that’s just a part of it. The word *repent* literally means to “turn around”, to totally change what you were doing, to walk in a totally new direction (following God), and follow a new way of thinking. So, Jesus told his audience (which includes us, by the way) to repent – to totally change our old ways of thinking, and seek a new way, which is God’s way. How? By following Jesus as a disciple, imitating him by loving God and neighbor. For unless we do, we will remain stuck in all our old ways that lead us to sin, destruction, and death – just as it has for so many of our fellow human beings.

Because it all gets down to this fundamental question of faith. Did God create “religion” in order to keep us in line, or to provide a new way of living? This is actually a great debate that has been going on for generations. Did God give us the 10 Commandments in order to give us rules for behavior and keep us from killing ourselves? Yes, but God also gave us the Law as a gift, in order to give us a way to live together in community, to focus on faithfulness to God first, and on having right relationships with our neighbors. That’s a new way of thinking for us human beings!

Some people say that we no longer think in those old ways, like the people who came to hear Jesus did in “Bible times”. We don’t blame natural disasters on

the people who suffer from them. But think again! How many times have we heard that 911 was a sign from God that America is going in the wrong direction, that Hurricane Katrina was punishment for the sins of New Orleans, and the earthquake in Haiti was God's response to godlessness and practices of voodoo by the Haitian people. Now, maybe people like Pat Robertson were the only ones who said this on tv, but they weren't the only people who thought that! Blaming the victim of natural disasters and making this God's judgment for sin is a practice that is alive and well among Christian people – and it's still just as wrong. It also can become personal, but no less tragic. How many times have I heard people ask, when they have fallen and broken a bone, or are losing their physical faculties like eyesight or hearing, "where have I gone wrong, Pastor?" "What have I done, have I not been living right?" It's sad, but people seek to find meaning in their suffering by equating sin with their suffering, so they seek to find some sin within them or in their past to explain why they suffer, and ask "why is God doing this to me?"

People of God, brothers and sisters. Let me be very clear. Jesus came to provide for you and me a new way of thinking, about God and about each other. God sent Jesus to make clear to us that God does not punish us for our sins with death and destruction. This was the ancient promise of God to Noah after the great Flood, but it seems we just don't believe it! Too many of us think that because our sins are so great, that the only *just* thing for God to do is destroy us all. So if God sees a fig tree not bearing fruit, the natural thing for God to do is destroy it! But Jesus taught that God is not the one ready to judge the fig tree and pull it up – that's our old view of God. The God whom Jesus called "Father" is the God who is also the gardener, who gives the fig tree innumerable second chances to bear fruit, even spreads manure around its roots to help it grow. So it is with God and us. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has proven that God is not the vindictive judge who punishes human sin with destruction and death. God sent Jesus to show us a new way of thinking and living, to die for us so that we will have *forgiveness of our sins*, and raised Jesus from the dead so that we know that we have the promise of life forever with him. It's a free gift of faith!

Of course we find judgment in our lives on earth. There will be sinfulness and suffering, death and destruction. But God is not the cause; God is in the response of love and compassion – that causes us in the Church to reach out to those who suffer in Haiti, in Chile, in New Orleans – and to our neighbor in need. God's purpose in giving us the Law is not so much to "keep us in line" (though it is useful to keep us from killing each other!), but to guide us in relationships of love for God and neighbor. For God doesn't seek to divide us into groups of those who live by the law versus those who sin against it, but rather to bring us together to live forever within his loving embrace of righteousness, and grace. It's an *invitation* from God, not a threat, as heard in the words of Isaiah, our first lesson:

*“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.... Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that God may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:1, 8-9)*

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.