

“The God Who Gets on His Knees”

Introduction: “Why did it happen? Please help me understand.” Such is the question often posed to pastors after an unthinkable tragedy has occurred. Whether it’s a shooter who has gone on a rampage or an aspect of nature that rages out of our control, whether it’s bad news from a doctor on her early morning rounds or that call from a policeman in the middle of the night, we can’t help but wonder, “What is the reason for this horrible event?”

This is not only a modern question, it is an ancient one as well. In our gospel reading for this morning we meet some who were moving along with Jesus who had brought a recent tragedy to his to his attention and were looking, it seems, for answers. There are many Jesus could have given but he chose not to answer the “why?” question. Instead, he used the opportunity to help his listeners come to terms with their mortality. Life, Jesus want us to be clear, is far more fragile than we think. At the same time, Jesus reveals that God is far more patient with us than we imagine, as patient as a gardener tending a young tree.

I. The Fragility of Life

A. It must have been local news that was spreading by word of mouth. “Did you hear, Jesus, about the awful thing that happened to the Jews from Galilee, about how they were on retreat in Jerusalem and when they went to the Temple to worship they were killed by Roman soldiers, at the direction of the governor, Pilate, who then had their blood mixed with their sacrifices?! Did you hear about that, Jesus?” The suggestion is that there was potential of a revolt by the Jews in Galilee against the Roman occupiers and Pilate wanted to squash such inclinations before they got started. Whether Jesus had heard about it yet or not, in his response he does not search for causes, though he could have. He could have pointed out that God has created us with the freedom to make choices, choices for good or for evil, which means that innocent people will suffer from the choices others, like Pilate, or any deranged gunman, makes. He could have said that tragedies, and how we respond, are one of the ways we mature in our faith. He could have said that through his upcoming death and resurrection, God will come to both know personally of our suffering and ensure that it will not have the last word.

B. Instead, Jesus answers with a question of his own: “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?” Evidently, one of the popular ways to try and explain suffering was that the sufferers somehow deserved it. According to this line of reasoning, the slaughter at the Temple was in some way punishment for their sin. Or, in another tragedy Jesus himself goes on to raise, the eighteen people who died when a tower fell on them were also, somehow, very guilty people who were getting what they deserved. Sadly, this is not an unfamiliar response. It’s what Job’s friends thought was the reason for his suffering, and it’s what was expressed by several after the tragedy of 9/11, just to name both an ancient and a modern example. “Sinners reap what they sow,” it is declared.

C. I think this sentiment is suggested because, in an odd sort of way, it has a comforting, self-justifying aspect to it. What it tempts us to take on is a kind of spiritual superiority complex through which we conclude that if the disaster did not happen to us, then we must be doing pretty well, we must be living godly and upright lives. No! says Jesus; such logic is twisted! Because of the presence of sin,

what happens in life is not always fair or easily explained. What is true, Jesus continues, what tragedies and disasters should move us to ponder, is that life is fragile. A particular life-span is not guaranteed. The gunman can come, the airplane can fall from the sky, at any time. "Like a thief in the night," as Peter puts it, actually quoting from Jesus (Lk. 12:39). Our years on this earth will come to an end, maybe sooner or maybe later, but they will end. When they do, we will face the reality that sin is a universal condition each of us must deal with. "Unless you repent," Jesus says, "you too will all perish." Jesus is not speaking of physical death here but spiritual death, of eternal separation from the living God. And the question is no longer, what about those poor Galileans and their sin, but, what about you and your sin? When we die, our sin, not someone else's, will be on the agenda.

D. Repentance is a great, Lenten theme. It's the acknowledgment that, as C. S. Lewis has put it, there is a real Moral Law that we have broken, and a real Power behind that Law who we have offended. We need to be reconciled to that Power and pursue living according to that Law. Repentance is not just saying we're sorry; it is seeking to change direction, to turn from the way we've been going and to now go the way God would have us go. Repentance goes beyond regret for past failings and moves on toward a total reorientation of our life.

II. The Patience of God

A. Given the importance of repentance in our lives, Jesus goes on to illustrate how we can know if our repentance is actually in process, whether it's really real. He does so using one of his favorite images, that of fruit. It's also a parable that not only reveals a God who takes sin seriously, but who is also exceedingly patient, a God who, while we are on our knees repenting, is himself on his knees working his gift of new life into us.

B. The tree that Jesus pictures has gone three years without producing fruit. The owner of the vineyard, wanting to be a good steward, orders his caretaker to cut it down because it's using up soil that could be used more profitably. But the gardener is not so quick to act. He pleads for the owner to give him another year, another year where he'll get on his knees, dig around the tree, spread manure, and seek to bring the tree to fruitful life. This, when you think about it, is not the most efficient way to go. Manure is not a quick fix. It's neither efficient or exhilarating. It's dead, despised waste. But it's actually teeming with life. If we're patient enough to let it do its work, it can do amazing things.

C. Now I'm not sure which figure of the trinity we might assign to which role here. But the overall point Jesus is seeking to make is that God is not in the kind of hurry we often are. God, Peter writes, is patient, not wanting anyone to perish. He wants all to come to repentance. So, he gets on his knees and digs and spreads manure. He tends what seems like a fruitless tree for just a little longer.

We looked at this passage during last week's trustees meeting for our opening devotional and the trustees, being numbers guys, calculated that if, for the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, then another year of tending the garden would be a lot of days! I'm not sure we can be that literal. But God will certainly tend that tree longer than we might. He deeply desires that we come back onto relationship with him. Will every tree respond? No, some will not. But God provides us with every opportunity, including the hearing this text today, for us to turn and reorient our lives around him.

D. When we do repent, when we do turn to Jesus and give him our sin, not just at the beginning of our Christian life, but each and every day, and say we want to live a new life, what happens?

1. First, Jesus forgives. "Leave it alone," he says. That's the same word he uses on the cross when he says, "Father, forgive them (leave it alone), for they know not what they do."
2. Second, Jesus takes the ax for us. The chopping that does happen is him dying in our place on the tree of the cross. He bears the justice of God for us, which is why he can say about us, "leave it alone."
3. Third, if we receive this gift, he sends his Spirit who, as we make every effort to work out this gift and live into the new life he offers, works within us (the manure, perhaps?), to enable us to bear the fruit that comes from repentance.

To be sure, this passage is a warning. It directs us to take a good look at our lives, to be aware of our mortality, and to ask if we're ready to get on our knees before the living and holy and righteous God of the universe. But it also holds out to us the incredible patience and love of this God who is willing to humbly get on his knees for us, taking on the form of a servant, giving up his life for us, and slowly and surely working the stuff of new life within us.

It is not our work that enables us to stand before a holy and righteous God, it is the work of His Son. That the Son's work is active in our lives is evidenced by the fruit of repentance. May we open ourselves to the work of this holy gardener.

Kyrie Pantokrator (A Song of Penitence, to the tune of "Faith of Our Fathers")

1 Almighty Lord Most High draw near
whose awesome splendor none can bear;
eternal God, in mercy hear,
receive once more the sinner's prayer;
upon your word of grace we call
whose word of power has ordered all.

2 How measureless your mercies stand,
the hope and pledge of sins forgiven;
those sins, unnumbered as the sand,
that hide the very stars of heaven;
O God of grace, to us impart
a penitent and contrite heart.

3 From such a heart we bend the knee
and all our sin and shame confess.
Lord, your unworthy servants see,
and clothe us round with righteousness;
that loved and pardoned, healed and blest,
we taste your mercies manifest.

4 So lift on high the Savior's praise
with all the hosts of heaven above,
and sing through everlasting days
the God of glory grace and love.
The Lord of all let us adore,
for ever and for evermore.