

## ***THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT***

***Luke 13:1-9***

Why do bad things happen to good people? We have been asking that question since the beginning of time.

What could people possibly do to deserve a tidal wave or an earthquake, a hurricane or tornado? Why do so many people have to die in plane crashes? Why are so many innocent people dying as a result of the wars and conflicts happening in the world? These are serious questions, and they cry out for a reasonable explanation.

Jesus' disciples had their own doubts about the injustice of it all. In the Gospel for today we get a glimpse of two tragedies that had occurred in the city of Jerusalem in Jesus' day.

What do we say when bad things like this happen? Over the years there have been many attempts to answer the question.

The ancient view was that God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous, so that when misfortune occurred, you could be sure the victim had it coming. We still hold to this theory, consciously or not. When bad things happen, we look for a logical explanation. More often than not, there is none.

When bad things happen, we often look for a positive outcome, as if putting a positive spin will somehow soften the blow. A Funeral Director was once quoted as saying, concerning the death of a child, "You know, God picks the most beautiful flowers for His heavenly bouquet." The family of that child didn't find that to be very comforting and became really upset with the Funeral Director.

Another explanation as to why bad things happen to good people is that life is a mystery, and although there are reasons why bad things happen as they do, those reasons are not always known to us. Seen from our perspective, life is like a tapestry, a jumble of knots and threads and loose ends protruding in every direction.

If we could only see the tapestry from the other side, from God's perspective, then we'd see that it has perfect form and symmetry and balance.

In his book, *Praying for Jennifer*, John Cobb puts forth yet another way of grappling with the question of why the innocent suffer. He says our problem is not in making sense of daily life, but in understanding the nature of God. Cobb says, as long as we see God as passing out blessings here, and inflicting punishments there, we'll always be at a loss to explain why bad things happen to good people.

His book, based on a true story, is about a group of four teenagers, all members of their church youth group. They were out joy riding in the country one day when the girl driving the car failed to negotiate a turn, and the car overturned. Three of the kids were thrown free and escaped with minor scrapes and bruises. The fourth, Jennifer, was critically injured. She was rushed to the hospital and put on life support. Jennifer's friends rallied around her and maintained a 24-hour vigil at the hospital and talked about what had happened and tried to make sense of it all.

After about a week, Jennifer awoke from the coma she was in and was taken off life support. Her friends rejoiced. Their prayers had been heard. Or so it seemed. But they soon got another bitter taste of reality when they learned that she was paralysed from the neck down, and would probably be a

quadriplegic for the rest of her life. Painstakingly, they came to understand that God is an ever-present force, a gentle Spirit, who abides with us and seeks to comfort us in our suffering. They came to see that God neither causes bad things to happen, nor prevents bad things from happening. God does not interfere with the natural consequences of cause and effect. The rain falls on the just as well as the unjust. God stands with us, but God does not stand in the way.

Our problem is that we'd like to have a world in which, if we abide by the rules, we can be assured of getting a fair deal.

This sort of wishful thinking is all well and good, until we realize how it influences our concept of God: We want a God who plays by our rules. If we read our Bibles, say our prayers, go to church, pay our tithe, abstain from sin and do nice things for others, then we ought to be able to expect equal consideration from God. We ought to be able to expect God to protect us from danger, answer our questions, keep His end of the bargain. The bottom line is this: We want a God on our terms.

Some of us probably wonder why did Jesus not answer the question about those Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices. He didn't answer the question because there is no answer. What Jesus did was address the underlying sinfulness portrayed by the question and said, "Unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way."

Repent of what we may ask? Repent of our idolatry, that is, our worship of images that are not God. Admit to ourselves that the God we worship is largely the product of our own design, the way we want God to be, and the way we want Him to behave, and not the God revealed to us in scripture, and in the life and example of Jesus Christ.

Remember the prophecy of Isaiah, who said, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ says the Lord.” Remember how God answered Job’s complaint by asking, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” And how Job repented and confessed, “I know that you can do all things...I have uttered that which I did not understand.”

We have to let go of that tired, old notion of a changeable God who conforms to our expectations, and accept the fact that the God we seek to worship and serve is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, who loves us so much, that He sent His only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to be wounded for our transgressions, and die for our sins that, in the midst of our pain and suffering, we might have the assurance that God is with us, we are not alone; and as St. Paul said to the church in Corinth, “God’s grace will be sufficient for all of our needs”.

**AMEN.**