

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.' "

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

FIRST READING: Psalm 63:1-8

1 O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. 2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. 4 So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. 5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips 6 when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. 8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“The Loving Gardener”

I really didn't know what to say. Ben saw me in the hospital hallway and invited me into his wife's room. He and Betty were members of my church. I was honestly surprised to see Betty looking so weak. The blinds were shut and it was dark, but I could see she looked very pale and small in her bed. She didn't say anything, barely looked at me. It was obvious she was very sick. And then Ben asked me, “Naomi, what did we do wrong? Betty never hurt anyone.” Why has this happened? I really didn't know what to say. And actually, I'm glad I didn't try. I might have done well to have assured them that God wasn't punishing her. I knew that was so. And I would have done well to have reminded them that Jesus was aching with them. His heart was the first to break when her diagnosis was made. Jesus' coming to be one of us, and dying and then rising again was all about his showing us that he knows our pain, that he is now living and sharing our lot, especially our suffering. I might have done well to have assured them of these things, but yet I could not have answered the question of why? “We humans long to make sense of senseless tragedies, and search for reasons even when there are none.”¹

Throughout history, people much smarter than I, philosophers and theologians, have struggled with the question of evil and the fact of innocent suffering. It's called the theodicy question. Bucketloads of ink have been spilled on it: If God is good and loving and powerful, why do innocent people suffer? Faithful people have wrestled it throughout history. All of us do at one point or another. In scripture, Job, the psalmists and of course, Habakkuk, asked why? And here, in Luke, Jesus addressed the subject himself when two terrible tragedies had obviously occurred. It seems that a group of faithful Jews from Galilee, traveled to Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the Temple, a religious obligation. Likely to send a message that Rome was in charge, or maybe simply out of brutal capriciousness, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, ordered his guards to kill them at worship. It was a meaningless, horrible tragedy. And then, there was the tragedy also where the tower of Siloam, on the city wall, collapsed. Eighteen people, maybe construction workers, died. *“Do you think that because these Galileans*

¹ Barbara K Lundblad. “*Could This Be the Year for Figs?*” <http://day1.org/638-could-this-be-the-year-for-figs> (Accessed 3/22/19).

suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Jesus posed the question that he knew people wanted to ask, and then he answered it. “No,” he emphatically said. “NO”. These tragic incidents did not happen because of anything that the victims did.

You see, during Jesus’ time most people believed that tragedy was the result of God’s judgment. It was part of their theology. Anyone who suffered had sinned, or their parents had sinned. Even in our day, there are those who link calamities with hidden sins that need avenging by God. We sometimes hear them on TV, don’t we? And maybe while we know this is improper thinking, we also at times cannot help but ask the questions of ourselves. Did we bring this on? Did we do something wrong? Is God punishing us? Now, this is not to say that we don’t live out the consequences of our sins...we do! If we lie and cheat and build a tower with fraudulent cheap materials...we pay the consequences and maybe others suffer too when it falls. Bad behaviors contribute to much of the misery in the world, but God neither causes nor delights in suffering and calamity. “No”, Jesus said, “NO” *Suffering is not a result of God punishing people’s sin.*

Our Midweek Bible Study group recently listened to a lecture on theodicy by re-known scholar, Rev. Dr. Thomas Long. Dr. Long makes the important point that the objecting voices of those in Scripture (the psalmists, Job, Habakkuk) who ask God, “Why?” and “How Long?” have, in fact, based their questions in their great faith. They’ve stood on their firm KNOWLEDGE of God’s character when they’ve raised their voices. “*These texts,*” he says, “*authorize our language of protest too because our faith tells us that God is one whom we know does not do these things.*” “Our God does not act like this. “*Shining the light of the Resurrection clear back to Creation, tells us that we are made in the image of God and that God is the Creator not the destroyer of life.*”² Long goes on to query, “*Where then does the destroyer of life...where does evil come from?*” and after much discussion, he points to Matthew 13, to the parable of the wheat and the weeds. You may remember the parable that Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven being like a man who sowed wheat in his field. At night

² Thomas Long. “*In the Midst of the Congregation, I will Praise You*” from the Midyear Winter Lecture Series of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, February, 2009.

an **enemy** came and sowed weeds among the wheat. As the plants grew, the servants asked the owner where the weeds came from and he said, “*An enemy did this,*” “The servants asked, *‘Do you want us to pull up the weeds?’* “*No*” he said, *‘If you pull up the weeds you will most certainly pull up the wheat too’*”. Long sees in this parable that evil is a power. We don’t know from where it came, but we know it is an enemy of God, and that God will vanquish it when the time is right. For the landowner said, “*At that time, I will tell the harvesters: first collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for they will be burned. then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.*” Friends, until the time when God will vanquish his enemy, the destroyer of life, God’s plan is to, in Christ, continue to work in the field, in his steady, gentle, empowering, contagiously selfless way to transform the weeds into wheat. This is who our God is. “*No*”, Jesus told the listeners that day, as he continued his trek to Jerusalem, “*Suffering and tragedy is not a result of God punishing people’s sin. No, it is not a result of God punishing people’s sin.*”

And then Jesus quickly went on to say, “*Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*” WHAT? It seems like he really changed directions here, and that’s because, he did. Jesus, quite intentionally got personal...and got those listening to him to turn their attention to their own lives, to what they could have some control over, to what they could have influence over. He asked them to be certain that they were ready, that they had things right between them and God such that they would not die without having taken the opportunity to repent.³ He offered a parable about the fig tree and the gardener to make his point.

There was a vineyard owner who’d planted some fig trees. And after waiting for the fig trees to have grown to fruit-bearing size, and another 3 years of non-production, the owner came once again looking for fruit. On at least one tree in particular, there again was no fruit. “Cut it down,” he told the gardener. “Why should it continue to use up the vineyard’s ground?” (It is important to know that fig trees are abundantly fruitful trees in the Mid-East, often producing as many as 3 crops a year. And that fig trees require little if no care. “They thrive on neglect”).⁴ But the gardener begged that it be left alone for one more year so that he

³ Jim Somerville. “Woodman, Spare that Tree!” <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/> (accessed 3-21-19).

⁴ Jim Somerville.

could dig around the roots, and put on some fertilizer. This is an almost crazy, unheard of abundance of effort on behalf of a fig tree.

If, in the parable, the gardener is considered to be Jesus and the fig tree, his disciples, then and now, it's clear that Jesus was saying that he is willing to go to extraordinary measures to help advocate and nurture us to live the most productive lives possible. But yet he warned us that we don't have unlimited time. We need use the time we have well. We need "seize the day." *Carpe Diem*. We need turn away from the ways of sin and death and toward the one who will bring new life. Whatever yesterday was like, whatever disappointments, mistakes we've made, we need use the gift of today to repent and start fresh. We need do something different...now.

I read a funny little story recently that a pastor colleague told about how he was with a group on a mission trip to Haiti. They were evidently flying from one side of the island to another in a little propeller plane. The turbulence was horrible, just horrible. Once they landed, they were all thankful to finally be on solid ground again. While unloading the baggage, he overheard one member of the group say to another, "I wasn't worried. Our pastor was head bowed in prayer the whole flight." He writes that he was embarrassed by this because what she thought was him praying was him in fact trying to keep from getting sick! His Lenten plan after reading this parable of the fig tree was that he could become the prayerful pastor that his parishioner believed he was.⁵

Friends, life is short. It's fragile. The question of theodicy, why is there innocent suffering, is not a question we can answer, although there are some things we can and would be wise to say. But we don't have to have answers to the big theodicy questions in order to make small, but crucial, life-giving changes in our lives right now. We need repent of the distractions which keep us from a productive life with and for God, and allow Jesus' forgiving and nourishing Spirit strengthen us to do good works, to bear good fruit, in his name. "*Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have today. Let us begin.*"⁶ (Mother Theresa) The fig tree was

⁵ Joseph Evans. "Spare the Ax" <http://day1.org/4534-spared-the-ax> (accessed 3/22/19).

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/carpe-diem>

spared the axe by the advocacy of the loving Gardener, and if we are hearing this message

today, we have been spared as well. So, here are the questions for us: What will we do with the rest of our day? What will we do with the rest of our lives? Let us pray.

Gracious and merciful God, whose patience goes far beyond our erring, be with us this day that we might repent and turn around. Give us the power and the grace to return to you. Give us the courage to admit what we have done wrong and what we have failed to do right. In this day, in this year, come to us, dig around our hearts, open us to your wisdom, your forgiveness, and your grace. And all God's people say...Amen.