

TEXT: Luke 13:1-9
THEME: There isn't a 'problem' of evil
SUBJECT: A fruitful life
TITLE: "Do you think . . .?"

Third Sunday in Lent
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Messiah Moravian
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We cannot help ourselves. It is almost instinctual, a reflex. When people suffer, especially those we know and love, we search for a reason as if knowing the reason would somehow minimize the suffering. More to the point, protect us from the pain.

Kate Bowler writes of her experience after being diagnosed with cancer, "Most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos."

"Do you think the Galileans sacrificed by Pilate on the altar along with their sheep were worse sinners than all other Galileans," Jesus asks in response to the crowd's desire to know why? Jesus assures the crowd those who were killed were no worse sinners than those who escaped.

Do you think the Christians murdered at prayer in Charleston, the Jews murdered at prayer in Pittsburg, the Muslims murdered at prayer in Christchurch, were worse sinners than all other Christians, all other Jews, all other Muslims?

Certain strands of biblical thought warrant such a conclusion. Good people will be rewarded; bad people will be punished. Theoretically, it seems fair, but it does not resonate with human experience. Innocent people suffer and guilty people prosper.

We know from experience of a correlation between certain behaviors and painful consequences. Texting while driving just as driving drunk can lead to terrible suffering. That does not mean, however, that if we are in an accident we must have been texting or drunk, that we are somehow responsible for our suffering and the suffering of others.

Funny thing is, it seems easier for us to accept some blame or guilt for our suffering than to accept chance as an explanation. Who wants to live in a universe where it is better to be lucky than good?

So distasteful is the notion that life is a crapshoot, a role of the dice, that some evangelical Christian theologians insist God is the cause of everything, that nothing is an accident. They think every death is God's will and part of God's plan, and this only appears unfair because we can't see the big picture.

Do you think the families of the 189 people killed in the crash of Lion Air Flight 610, and the families of the 157 people killed on Ethiopian Airline Flight 302, would find this explanation comforting? Or do you think they would conclude such a God is a monster?

Many pious Christians, Jews, and Muslims, prefer to think God is free to do whatever God pleases, even if that entails their suffering unjustly, than to think stuff just happens.

To the story of Pilates' sacrifice of the Galileans, Jesus adds the story of the fall of the tower of Siloam, probably a watch tower built next to Jerusalem's water supply to protect it from enemies. "Do you think the eighteen killed by the falling tower were worse offenders than all the other residents of Jerusalem," Jesus asks?

We don't know if the residents of Jerusalem blamed the engineers who designed the tower or the contractor who built it. Jesus implies people were blaming the victims. The tower fell on them because they deserved to die.

Jesus challenges the idea of comparative righteousness. It is not only the really bad apples that fall. The slightly bruised apples also fall. Then he warns us to repent or we too will perish just as they did.

Perplexing! Is Jesus saying repentance saves us from suffering and death? The people of Nineveh heeded Jonah's warning, repented, and the city was spared. But those Pilate slaughtered along with their sacrifices were in the very act of repentance.

I think Jesus is trying to move us away from the arrogance of acting like an omniscient narrator, pretending we can explain suffering. I think Jesus is trying to move us away from a theology that seeks to make orderly what has been torn asunder by the cruelties of disaster.

All explanations of suffering, from God's will to bad luck, are attempts to shield us from the pain. "Repent," says Jesus. Change your way of thinking. If we think we have escaped suffering because we are better than or luckier than, Jesus warns us to think again.

Eric D. Barreto asks, "Why do we rush to a mind that explains rather than a heart that cracks open with tears? Perhaps because sitting with pain is a spiritual discipline we have fled at every turn."

The healing of suffering comes, however slowly, not by explanation but by hospitality. Healing begins, not by fleeing from or fighting the pain, but by sitting with it. Healing arises from being with the one who suffers, by walking together and humbly through our ignorance of life's hidden depths.

The darkness retreats, perhaps imperceptibly at first, in a gleam of light powerful enough to reveal, not an answer, but the way a little beyond ourselves, toward the next person, lost like us in the dark. Finding the solitary strength, in the chaos of life, to follow that light into the community of fellow sufferers is repentance.