

**Luke 13:1-9**

Third Sunday in Lent (Series C)

**Lessons for the Day: Ezekiel 33:7-20; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9**

*(Not) What We Were Hoping For*

March 20, 2022

*There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

It was not one of David's better moments. I think most people are familiar with the account of David's sin with Bathsheba. David seduces and commits adultery with another man's wife. He gets her pregnant. Her husband is off fighting in David's army, so David tries to cover up the adultery by having Uriah come home to be with his wife. When Uriah denies himself the pleasure of his wife's company, David plots to have him killed in battle. David even sets himself up as a caring king by bringing Bathsheba into his own household, to care for this now widowed young woman.

Things seem to be going David's way, until the prophet Nathan comes to him. Nathan tells David a story about a rich and powerful man who had everything, but who stole the one little lamb of a poor man in order to feed some guests. We are told: *"Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die."* (2 Samuel 12:5, ESV) But Nathan turns the tables on David, pointing out that this is what David did with Bathsheba. That wasn't what David was hoping for. Instead of being able to judge someone else, he now has to confront his own evil, sinful actions.

People are quick to jump to conclusions, especially when it comes to the sins of others. It is so easy for us to point the finger at others, and miss the fact that God's Word speaks to us and to our greatest need. That is the lesson we learn through our text today. It is not necessarily the lesson we are hoping to learn.

It begins as some of the people gathered to hear Jesus speak tell him about the latest news from Jerusalem. Some Galileans had gone to the temple to offer animal sacrifices. However, while there, Roman soldiers attacked and killed some of them and their blood *"mingled with their sacrifices"*. They seem to report this as though they thought that the sins of those who were killed were so great that God demanded their own blood for atonement and not just that of the animals. We know nothing more about the incident, although it does fit with the actions of Pilate and the Roman soldiers that we know from other places in the historical record. Just as Job's friends tried to "comfort" him by pointing out that the terrible things happening in his life must be from some horrible, secret sin, so these people think the root cause of this calamity was the terrible sins of the people themselves.

There are times when sin does bring specific consequences and God's judgement. We read how Abimelech was killed by a millstone thrown from a tower, and Scripture tells us: *"Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal."* (Judges 9:56-57, ESV) There are many other instances in Scripture where specific sins resulted in temporal punishments by God, and this can lead us to think that those who suffer calamity deserve it. I know that it often seems that the other extreme is more prevalent today—that no one sees any sin, and so no one deserves the suffering, the distress, or the pain that we so often see in this world. Yes, there are a few truly bad people. Hitler deserved it. Maybe Putin deserves it. But most people don't deserve to suffer. They just aren't bad people.

When we see the tragedies and suffering of our world, do we think that those who suffer must have had it coming to them in some sort of way? There are many who believe in some sort of mindless universal law that they call karma, whereby your actions determine what will happen to you in the days to come. Karma isn't real, but God is. We tend to lean on the law—at least as we apply it to others. It's still the simple idea that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people.

Jesus turns the tables on all those who think this way and makes it clear: ***“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”***

Jesus gets right to the true heart of the issue: ***unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*** This is not what we were hoping for. We want Jesus to see us the way we see ourselves. We want Him to recognize that we aren't like other people. But Jesus doesn't want us focussing on other people. He wants us to look at ourselves and our own sinfulness. The truth that Scripture makes very clear is this: ***“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** (Romans 3:22-23, ESV) I know that there are times people wonder why we have to hear the same basic messages over and over in sermons. I think of the man who went home one Sunday after church. His wife had been unable to attend because of illness. She asked, “what did the pastor preach about this morning?” “He talked about sin”, was her husband's reply. “Well, what did he say about it?”, asked the wife. “He's against it”. Yes, we do hear that lesson a great deal. We need to hear about sin, because we continue to live in a world of sin. More than that, we often fail to see our sinfulness for what it really is. In the Old Testament lesson today, Ezekiel is sent to tell the people of Israel: ***Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?*** (Ezekiel 33:11 - ESV) Paul reminds us in the epistle lesson of some of the experiences from the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel and says: ***Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.*** (1 Corinthians 10:11 - ESV) God wants us to learn the lessons of sin and repentance, because it is the only way He can teach us the even greater lesson: the lesson of His grace.

This is what the parable of the fig tree teaches us. In our text, the owner of a vineyard complains that a fig tree planted in the vineyard wasn't bearing any fruit. It doesn't deserve to take up space or take water and the nutrients of the soil from the other plants. The vinedresser comes to the rescue of the tree, promising to dig around it, fertilize it, and water it carefully. In an even greater way, Jesus has come to our rescue. We have been fruitless. We are not the people we are called to be. We deserve the judgement of God against our sinful, empty lives. Thankfully, even as we speak of sin, we have this wonderful assurance of the patience, love and mercy of our God. It isn't as if God the Son and God the Father have different attitudes towards us. The Father will discipline as He must, but He sent the Son who now defends us before the Father. He takes our sin into His own sinless flesh, to cover us with His righteousness. From the cross, He prays for us and says, ***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*** (Luke 23:34, ESV) He dies to pay for our sinfulness, for our fruitlessness. He rises again, and comes to us in His Word to dig and fertilize and prepare us for the life we have as His beloved children. He feeds us with His own body and blood as we come to His table. He waters us with the life-giving water of His Spirit, poured out on us in our Baptism.

When the people told Jesus about the Galileans who were killed, I know they weren't expecting to be lumped with them as sinners. Being told that we also are doomed by our sin is not what we are hoping for, either. Yet what we have no right to hope for is the blessing we receive in Christ. We, who deserve God's wrath and punishment are forgiven and free. We have a living hope through a living Lord. In and through Christ and in the new life we have through His resurrection, we stop looking at what everyone else is doing, and we start to see what we are in Christ. Jesus tells us: ***“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”*** (John 15:5-6, ESV) How blessed we are that He goes on to assure us: ***“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”*** (John 15:16, ESV)

Being known as sinners is not what we hoped for. Being forgiven and free is not what we deserve. Yet God works that forgiveness for us in the death and resurrection of Christ. He does this for the same reason He continues to call us to repentance: because He loves us. Even in those things we don't see as fair or deserved, God still is at work to call us to His mercy and grace. Even though sin brings forth pain, God works to lead us to repentance and life. In that life, purchased and won for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God changes the sorrow and sadness of sin to the glory of peace and joy in Him forevermore. Amen.