

Sermon Theme: Why does God let bad things happen?

Sermon Reading: Luke 13:1-5

When the news broke in 2011 that Osama bin Laden had been tracked and killed by a US Navy SEAL team, one could almost hear the Star Spangled Banner playing in the air and see a bald eagle flying across the sky holding the American flag. Our chests filled with patriotic pride and a feeling of, “We got him,” was shared by many an American. The general consensus in the United States was that justice had prevailed and bin Laden finally got what he deserved.

An army hero comes home and receives a medal for outstanding service having one over-and-above the call of duty. You might hear the story and there’s the nodding of the heads in agreement: “Yes, they deserved the medal for their work and sacrifice.”

When bad things happen to bad people, when good things happen to good people, it makes sense to us. We want to believe that cliché line, “What goes around, comes around,” is true. There’s a part of us that wants to believe in *Karma* that as long as I’m good and kind to most people, good things will happen to me.

But then it doesn’t. A hard-working dad in the prime of his life, lived a healthy lifestyle, is diagnosed with a severe stage of cancer and only has a few months to live. A promising teenager with their entire life ahead of them gets into an accident on the way to school and is killed just days before graduation. Students are gathered in school like any other day when one of their classmates pulls out a gun and starts shooting, killing some and injuring more. How can something like that happen? But it’s not only tragedies that can leave one questioning. A hard working mom who tries to do everything “right” and do what’s best for her kids, but nothing seems to help or work. Why? One does their best, puts in the time, the effort, but no matter what they try they can’t get ahead. Why?

In times of tragedy and times of struggle we ask, “Why?” And sometimes it might be asked, “Why does God let bad things happen?” How would you answer that for someone who lost a spouse, their child, their loved one, who always is scraping and fighting to get by?

Some people in Luke 13 thought they had it figured out. There were some present who told Jesus about an instance concerning a group of Galileans. It seems these Galileans were in the temple making sacrifices when Pilate gave the order that they be cut down and killed on the spot so their blood mixed with the blood of the sacrifices. Those are all the details of this horrible and tragic event that we’re given in all the history books. And from Jesus’ response in verse 2, the implied thought of these people is that these Galileans must have done something horrible to have suffered such a horrible fate.

Because—as we are trying to answer as well—why else would such a bad thing happen?

Jesus responds, “**Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners because they suffered these things? I tell you, no.**” But then he doesn’t give a reason why the bad thing happened. Instead, he warns them, “**Unless you repent, you will all perish too.**” And then he continues to bring up another situation. Evidently a tower in Siloam had fallen killing eighteen people. The difference here is that this incident didn’t come at the hands of a human being, but lay in the hands of God. So, as the group’s logic should go, that must mean that these eighteen individuals were worse sinners than all the other people living in Jerusalem, right? Jesus says, “**I tell you, no.**” And again, “**Unless you repent, you will all perish too.**”

Again, the crowd was wrestling a problem that we wrestle with: why does God let bad things happen? And the easiest answer for us—at least we think—is that bad, horrible things happen to those who do bad, horrible things. They deserve it. So in order to answer the question of, “Why do bad things happen?” We need to answer, what does and individual deserve? We want to believe that what

happens to us is a direct result from something that I have done; that thought gives us a sense of control over lives and for us that seems fair. If I do something good, then it only seems right and fair that something good happens to me. If I do something bad, then it seems only right and fair that something bad happens. Actions have consequences; punishment should fit the crime; reward should fit the job done. Bad should happen only to those who do bad things.

Or at least that's what we say until it is actually carried out. Because we are really good at giving ourselves more credit than we deserve while at the same time downplaying the seriousness of the bad that we do. For instance, maybe you don't usually do it, so you decide you are going to do the dishes without being asked. How the pride is then built up, "Look at what I was willing to do!" While it also conveniently forgets all the other times you grumbled when you were asked to do them.

So what is it that we deserve? We know we aren't entitled to anything. We know that God doesn't owe us anything; everything is a gift from him. But considering what you have to put up with, couldn't he make life a little easier? We know that we don't deserve anything. But I did put in all that effort, time, and work. Doesn't that count for something? It just doesn't seem fair that I not get more out of it. How quickly our mindset changes. But then when we don't receive what we expect or we are given something bad we don't think we deserve, we cry out, "Unfair."

But what if God was fair? Unlike how our pride wants to see it, the good things we accomplish do not wipe out the bad. The nice gift you buy someone to make up for hurting them doesn't take away the fact that you hurt them. It doesn't work with humans; it most certainly doesn't work with God. Those bad, sinful actions are still very present. And the thing is, if we are truthful with ourselves, the bad actions far outweigh the good especially when you consider how all too often even those good actions are stained with sinful attitudes and impure motivations. And again, the fact remains, those bad things still are present. And even if we try and compare our actions to someone else that they are worse sinners, God only compares our actions to him. He says, "**Be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy**" (Leviticus 11:44-45). And the fact is that "**whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it**" (James 2:10). So what would be fair is that he punish you and me for every time that we have crossed the line of his Law and sinned. What is fair is that every time we have broken his trust and selfishly loved ourselves, he would completely take his love and blessings away from us. What is fair is that for even a single time when we haven't lived to his glory, he would take our lives. For the wages, payment, what we are owed for sin still is and always will be death. Death here on this earth; eternal death and perishing forever in hell.

We don't want God to be fair. All too easily we downplay sin forgetting how much God really hates it. We need God to be as he describes himself: just. That means he does uphold his Law. That means he does punish sin. But thanks be to God he did something that in our eyes is completely unfair. He did not want you to perish in hell so while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus claimed all sin to be his sin—the bad things have been removed from you; they are not on your scale but placed on Jesus' scale—so the sinless Son of God was punished. And because he punished Jesus God will not punish you—he is just; justice was already served and the payment has already been made. He doesn't give you what your sins are owed, instead he gives you forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. God does not treat us as our sins deserve, because your sin has been removed as far as the east is from the west.

Jesus did all this so you would not perish. That's why he also calls the people of his day, that's why he calls you, to repent. He doesn't want you to be lost, but repent, turn from the path of destruction, from sin and unbelief and in faith turn to God. Recognize the sin in your life and the seriousness of that sin. Hate it and repent. Why confess your sin? Because forgiveness of sins is yours with Jesus' perfect life

and innocent death. Why turn to God? Because he raised Jesus from the dead having accepted his payment for sin giving Jesus and you life with him. Why do we repent turning from that sin? Because the Holy Spirit works in your heart to show you that as God's people we want to live to him and his glory.

You see, Jesus doesn't react to the situation the way the people want in the reading because there was something more that they needed to be taught. When things happen to us our first reaction is wanting to find out the reason why. But Jesus shows that the better question to ask is, "What lesson is there to be learned?" God allows or even sends what we see as bad things into our lives to teach us.

Sometimes, yes, we can see the direct correlation—eating unhealthy food may lead to health complications. The lesson to be learned is that there needs to be a lifestyle change. Sometimes it's to teach you that you are relying on the wrong thing and God wants you to lean on him because he cares for you. Sometimes it's because you had become comfortable with sin and God wants you to wake up so you are not lost. Sometimes it is simply because we live in a sinful world and so bad things happen and God then uses it to teach you to trust and rely on him. A lot times that is the most difficult lesson to learn and the hardest to believe. So God works through his Word and sacraments to strengthen your faith and lead you to him.

The truth is, even though we think we need it, God might be telling you that you don't need to know why. Maybe one day he will show you to teach you some more. Maybe he will give you a clue in heaven. But why isn't the most important right now. What is most important is your relationship with God; and so, Jesus tells you, "Repent." Bad is going to happen. Suffering and struggle is part of this world and this life. Why do bad things happen? Most of the time I don't know. What I do know is that God has it under control and that he is working all things to the ultimate good of his people. What I do know is that Jesus lives for you so that you who believe will not perish but have eternal life with him. Amen.