

Tending Our Future
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
2-28-2016
Luke 13:1-9

On Wednesday afternoon, Kathryn texted to let me know that the power had gone out at Sardis. I was making my way North on Sardis Road, and I couldn't help but notice that Sardis Presbyterian and St. Stephen United Methodist hadn't been affected by the outage. What did we do to deserve this? Is God not Baptist anymore?

Our power finally came back on about 4:30 pm. We emailed and printed what we needed to, and then I headed home. As I pulled into my driveway, I noticed the garage door was closed, and Jacqueline was making her way through our front door. "Power's out," she said. "Aw, man," I thought to myself, "What did we do to deserve this? Did we cut somebody off on the way to work? Is this karma for not mowing our yard? Is God not just mad at Baptists collectively, but individually, too?"

As I got out of the car, I saw our neighbor Brett coming around the corner. He was inspecting the damage from a tree that fell onto his deck. "I didn't think Brett was Baptist!"

It's human nature to want to explain things. There's got to be a reason for everything. And especially bad things. Bad things don't just happen randomly, right? Throughout the course of history, humanity has tried to rationalize misfortune, calamity, and death with a simple explanation: sin. Bad things happen to people who do bad things.

In today's lection, a crowd gathers around Jesus. And here's the topic of conversation: Why do bad things happen?

The crowd laments Pilate's cruelty. Like other Roman officials, he rules with an iron fist, and he demonstrates his power through capital punishment. Pilate has killed his fair share of Galileans. But it's not just that. Pilate has little tolerance for Jewish worship. The text insinuates that he even mingles the blood of dead Galileans with his own sacrificial worship.

The crowd wants an explanation for the bad things happening in and around Jerusalem. And they want to fall back on the logic that the recipients of Pilate's wrath must have deserved it.

Jesus responds. "So you want to know if the Galileans who suffered under Pilate are worse sinners than those Galileans who managed to escape this fate. Of course not! These people were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were not killed because of their sin. They were killed because of a political figure who values power over human life."

But then Jesus adds a second statement. "But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Those words "repent" and "perish" are a little jarring. Don't be scared off by them just yet. Wait for what Jesus says next.

"Or what about those folks who were killed when the tower fell at Siloam? Were they worse sinners than the folks who lived in other parts of Jerusalem? Of course not! But unless you repent, you will all perish, just as they did."

Sharon Ringe notes that Jesus points to two very clear examples of catastrophes where the victims are innocent. She likens Pilate's assaults to a modern day terrorist attack, and the tower's collapse to a modern day construction accident. Jesus infers that these are not acts of God, or even of nature, but rather something beyond God's control. In other words, God doesn't go around arbitrarily doling out doses of calamity for the fun of it.

So Jesus tells us that God is not responsible for bad things. But Jesus chooses to skip over the why of bad things, and instead, he issues a warning about the fleeting nature of life: "Repent, or you will all perish just as they did."

I don't think this a statement about an impending eternal judgment, or about the depraved nature of humanity. I think Jesus chooses the word repent to add urgency to his message. He alerts us to the fact that even under the protection and love of a good God, bad things will still happen. And so we must value our lives and our gifts in every moment. We must turn our attention to the present.

Ringe points us back to these two examples of terrorism and architectural failure. If we repent, or turn towards God, that means we participate in God's economy of love. Now. In the present. It means our currency is measured in empathy and compassion for our neighbors. It means we pay attention to our surroundings.

In such an economy, people of faith cannot stand idly by when rulers gain power by any means necessary, or when terrorists invoke fear and violence to dominate the weak. People of faith cannot tolerate builders who value the return on their investment more than they value the safety and wellbeing of a building's occupants. In God's economy, everybody is recognized as somebody, created and loved by God.

Caesar's economy seeks to make people expendable commodities rather than children of God. And in such an economy, we perish. When voting rights are denied, when schools are segregated, when bathroom doors are off-limits, when affordable housing is unavailable, when ANY child goes hungry...

We perish. We perish because God's economy is not allowed to bring us into the fullness of life, that place where all are called God's children. Jesus says, "repent!" Use the gifts God has given you to make God's economy a reality, to usher in the Kingdom Christ bid come.

Martin Luther King, Eli Wiesel, and others have noted that indifference is the biggest assault to God's justice. When Jesus says, "repent," I think he says, "Stop being indifferent to the needs of others. Indifference is life-draining. Start noticing this world. Start noticing your neighbor. Start noticing God. These things aren't life-draining. They're life-giving!"

Jesus closes this lection with a parable. A man planted a fig tree. For three years it had been the same. Each year he'd come to survey his property, hoping to sample a delicious fig. And for three years, he'd gotten the same result. Nothing, no figs!!! The man had seen enough. "Just cut it down," he told the gardener. "There's no use in wasting good soil." But the gardener asked him to reconsider. "Let me tend to it for another year. I'll give it extra attention, and re-fertilize it. And if you come back next year, and there is no fruit, then you can cut it down."

We're never told what the next year brought. We're left to wonder if the gardener's last-second reprieve was just theumph that little tree needed to become fruit-bearing.

This seems a fitting parable for Lent.

The calendar reveals another year. We wait for Easter in our garden. But we don't see any fruits. This world we're trying to build, God's world, that one we proclaimed in December with Christ's birth, we don't see it yet.

Of course the truth is, we haven't been too attentive. In our busy-ness, we haven't noticed all the weeds choking out its progress.

But we've got time. God has granted us reprieve. Another year to live. To repent. To stop being indifferent, and start being attuned to God's creation.

Let's grab our shovels and Miracle Grow (the environmentally-friendly kind of course!). Lord knows, a little TLC can do wonders for even the most hopeless garden. And besides, Sunday's comin' – that day where life grows even out of death.

In the meantime, we'll tend to the garden of our future. May it be a future full of figs!

Amen.