

Lenten Stories: Past, Present, Future

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Luke 13:1-9

Why do bad things happen? Let alone, why do bad things happen to good people? It is a perennial, perpetual human question. We read books. Talk with loved ones late into the night. Argue with ourselves, with the universe, with God. A young person is killed in a car accident. An insidious cancer takes someone far too early. Bombs explode killing innocent civilians, children and families.

Why, we wonder. And a corollary, if you are a person of faith, or have any interest in religion...why does God allow such things to happen. And even more poignant and profound...Why does a loving God allow such things to happen.

Forty-five years ago in two days, my father and two colleagues – three Presbyterian ministers – were driving from Columbus, Ohio to Cleveland to attend the funeral of a colleague's father. Nearly there, the car hit a patch of ice and veered off the highway, essentially wrapping itself around a tree. The person in the back seat was jostled around a bit. The driver of the car, a dear man and a good friend, was killed instantly. My father experienced what is now called a TBI, a traumatic brain injury, in intensive care for several weeks, the hospital for several more, a care facility for several more. A patch of ice, going to a colleague's father's funeral. A few degrees warmer, or a few inches one way or the other, and who knows.

I was in the eighth grade. Forty-five years and two days, and there are moments when I remember it like it happened yesterday.

In his long convalescence, and even much later, I don't remember my dad ever asking why, or blaming God. Nor did my mom, who took on a heightened and enhanced care-taking role for him and the three of us. They might have, but we didn't know.

A patch of ice. A stray bullet. A random cancer cell. The theologians call it the “theodicy” question, meaning something like “God justice” or “divine justice,” the understanding of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil. The exploration of that question has driven some far away from the faith, even as it has welcomed others further into it. It is a good question to explore in Lent, when Jesus – God’s love made incarnate – is drawn deeper and deeper into human evil as he journeys to Good Friday. And it is a good question to explore today, as Jesus engages in deep conversation with those who follow him and who carry with them some significant “why” questions.

His followers tell Jesus about a group of Galileans killed by Pilate. Jesus knows what they are thinking. Did they deserve it? Did they do something to deserve it? Were they being punished for something their ancestors did, as some believed? Before they even wonder aloud, he answers their unspoken question – no. No.

Then he takes it one step further. There was, apparently, some kind of accident. A tower fell on eighteen people, killing them. We can envision that. Jesus wonders aloud if those killed deserved it because they were somehow worse than the other Galileans, because he knows that some are thinking that. He answers his own question in the same way – no. No.

He calls them, twice, to repentance, to change course in whatever way their courses needed changing. He tells them to focus on themselves, not to be selective in their judgment, to discard any thinking that some have it coming and some don’t. And he does not equate these deaths – tragic, accidental, inexplicable, with God’s justice, with God at all, for that matter.

However we pursue the theodicy question – the presence of evil in the world and the existence of a good and loving God – Jesus refuses to connect the two.

So many possibilities.

- God could have caused this.
- God could have allowed it to happen.
- God could have watched as a neutral observer.
- There could be no God.

None of those options are acceptable to Jesus, and if any of them were acceptable to us, it would leave us, I believe, with an unacceptable understanding of who God is. Rather, we are left with mystery. We are left with paradox. We are left with questions.

Some find that satisfying enough; some do not. Chelsey Harmon writes that “Jesus doesn’t answer the why question. When it comes to theodicy, Scripture rarely, if ever, does. Instead, God’s wisdom is to turn our hearts and eyes elsewhere. In trying to understand the why question, Jesus has told them they are looking for the wrong answer.” Harmon says that “All of us are human, Jesus seems to be saying. All of us will die, he tells us. And all need to repent, the deserving and undeserving.”

Then he does what Jesus does. He tells a story. He tells a story about a landowner who plants a fig tree. The owner goes to his field and notices no figs. Frustrated, he tells his gardener to cut the tree down.

We have been there, in one way or another. Impatience leads us to end something – a job, a relationship, a task. Some things need ending, of course, unhealthy things. We read this week in our Bible study Jesus’ reminder that some things need pruning to allow for growth. We get that.

But we also get the need for patience, or I hope we do. In the middle of March Madness, with my brackets busted about five minutes in, I love the stories of the walk-on players who persevere, who work hard, who barely make the team and who contribute in some way to their team’s success. And if sports seems too trivial (and it can seem trivial right now), we know other situations – in music or art, in a job or relationship. A person living with depression, or addiction, who may think that the effort toward healing and wholeness is just not worth it.

So the owner’s impatience feels common, and almost acceptable. Chop it down, he tells his gardener. I’ve invested three years, and nothing. Chop it down. We can make better use of the soil with another plant. This all sounds reasonable. I’m no fig tree grower; I haven’t even had a Fig Newton in a very long time. But three years seems like plenty of time.

To all but the gardener. The gardener has a different view of time, a different view of potential. Give me another year, he requests his owner. I will be more diligent in tending to the soil, in adding fertilizer. I believe that growth can happen, that this tree will yield a crop, will bear fruit. Give me a year. If there is growth, we’re good. If not, I will cut it down.

The parable ends, with an uncharacteristically open ending. We want to believe that a year from now that the tree will be sagging from the weight of so many figs, if that's a thing. We want to believe that the gardener's efforts and the owner's even reluctant patience will pay off.

I must admit to a sense of uncertainty, lack of clarity, even uneasiness, with this passage that I have now been wrestling with for several months. For some passages, the message is clear, even if it's not easy. I get the component parts this morning, or at least I think I do. A good and gracious and loving God does not cause bad things to happen, nor is there any differentiation between what happens – good or bad – to whom we would understand to be either the deserving or undeserving. I do not believe, therefore, in the adage that God doesn't give us more than we can handle, or the secular corollary, that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger. I simply say that that which doesn't kill us doesn't kill us.

And as to God giving us things, well that makes God out to be some kind of controlling and capricious deity, much different than the loving, gracious God who wills justice for the world and who created me – us – for loving relationship. To embrace that understanding of God and be embraced by it needs to make space for bad things happening, to all kinds of people, good and bad, deserving or not.

Jesus' abrupt call to repent in verses 3 and 5 are not really so abrupt at all. He eliminates categories – good or bad, deserving or undeserving – and lifts up one category. Human. We are not to worry about why others die, other than mourn their deaths and show compassion for those who survive. Another quasi-theological adage fails at that point as well – “there but for the grace of God go I” – as if God's grace is involved in parsing out who suffers and who does not.

So we are called not to judge. And we are called to repent, from whatever beliefs of behaviors prevent us from living as fully as we can, in loving relationship with ourselves or others or neighbors or even God. However you understand yourself, or others understand you, you know there is room for course correction, for change of direction.

That's what repentance is, less about a dramatic conversion moment and more about taking stock, what the twelve step program calls “Making a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”

Perhaps that's the connection to the fig tree. A fig tree cannot take moral inventory, but then again it's not really about the fig tree, is it? It is, again, that word, repentance,

understood differently than the fear-inducing, guilt-wallowing caricature it sometimes is and, more to the point, how Jesus would have us understand it. Whatever course correction, change of direction, growth, if you will, is needed, will take nurture, cultivation – water and sun and fertilizer in this case and the human equivalents of these. Time. Prayer. Honest reflection with our own spirits and those who care about us. Your growth will be yours and mine will be mine, but Jesus seems to be holding out the vision that growth is possible, if we focus less on the flaws of others and more on the transformation of our own lives.

Again, Chelsey Harmon writes that “If we do not heed the care and guidance of the one who prunes and makes us grow, we run the risk of being thrown into the burn pile. We all live by the grace of God and none of us are more or less deserving than the next guy. The only other thing that is for sure is that we have a loving God who is unbelievably patient and is willing to coax and prod us and our weak faith.”

Mary Oliver’s lovely poem called “Wild Geese” frames it for us, what deep repentance looks like, what grace looks like, what growth looks like...

“You do not have to be good./ You do not have to walk on your knees/
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting./
You only have to let the soft animal of your body/ love what it loves./
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine./
Meanwhile the world goes on./ Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the
rain/ are moving across the landscapes,/ over the prairies and the deep trees,/
the mountains and the rivers./ Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue
air,/ are heading home again./ Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,/
the world offers itself to your imagination,/
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—/
over and over announcing your place/ in the family of things.”

Amen.