

**Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent
Year C**

[RCL] Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8

What did they do to deserve that?

Jesus knew questions like this were on people's minds when they came to tell him horrible news: Pilate – yes, the same Pontius Pilate who oversaw the crucifixion of Jesus – slaughtered some Galilean Jews. Making Pilate's appalling action even more offensive is that he did this terrible thing while they were offering their sacrifices in Jerusalem.

It's Jesus who asks the questions on everyone's minds: Is it because those Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans that this happened to them? Did they do something to deserve such an awful death?

And it's Jesus who gives the answer: No.

Or when the tower of Siloam fell and eighteen people were killed, crushed because they stood in the wrong place at the time, is that because they were sinners? Jesus says no.

The question is this. Is God keeping track in some gold-leafed ledger who's been naughty or nice and whether to respond with earthly punishments or rewards? The answer is no. Does God allow tyrants to kill people or tsunamis to drown people because they've done something to deserve it? No.

Another time some people ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither." says Jesus, and he cures the man of his blindness. Jesus denies a correlation between the man's problem and someone's sin.

Yet, it's a persistent question. And it goes with a persistent assumption, that somehow what people get in life is what they deserve – that there must be a connection between the sorts of people they are and the bad or good things that come their way in life. We've heard people say, "I wonder what he did to deserve that?" or make pronouncements, "this plague/natural disaster/fill in the blank is God's punishment for their sin."

Well, says Jesus, take it from me, that is not how it works. Sometimes we do suffer as a direct result of some wrong we have done, some bad decision, some action we've neglected to take and we suffer the consequences. Mistreat your body, and you will get hurt. Mistreat a friend, and you may damage your friendship. The negative consequences of our actions can be clear. But sometimes we're confused, not when we can see how a mistake or bad action has led to suffering, but when we've been good, done right, tried hard, and still, nevertheless, we suffer.

As Christians, we really shouldn't be so surprised when this happens. The idea that only good things happen to good people should have been put to rest when Jesus was nailed to the cross.

Christian faith is no magic protection against tragedy. The cross is our central symbol – the cross, where an innocent man died the death of a criminal. Nonetheless, Christians have long wondered why bad things happen to people, even good people. In his book *The City of God*, St. Augustine considered the great suffering that occurred when the barbarians sacked Rome, and he noted that when the barbarians raped and pillaged, Christians suffered just as much as non-Christians. Faith in Christ did not make them immune to pain and tragedy. Augustine wrote, “Christians differ from Pagans, not in the ills which befall them, but in what they *do* with the ills that befall them.” The Christian faith does not give us a way around tragedy. Faith gives us a way through tragedy.

So, no we can’t look at tragedy and assume that someone did something to deserve it.

“But,” Jesus says, “unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

What kind of a reply is that?

Jesus is not saying that questions are bad or that ‘why’ isn’t a vital human question. Jesus is saying, don’t be distracted by the wrong question. To Jesus, the ‘why’ isn’t important. God made us in love and gave us free will, freedom to choose how to respond, how to act. In freedom, humans have written symphonies and started wars. God made a dynamic world in which natural things change and evolve into beautiful new forms of life and into cancer cells.

A good question to ask, according to Jesus, isn’t: what did she do to deserve that suffering? The much more important question is: how is your relationship with God? Jesus says don’t be distracted by looking at what happened to someone else. Don’t spend your time wondering what must someone have done to deserve what they are going through. Instead, look at yourself – while you still have time.

Jesus refuses to get caught up in the question of whether or not someone else deserves to suffer, and instead asks another question: What in your life needs repenting, acknowledging, and turning around? What needs to be turned over to God? What needs to be forgiven?

Things will happen. And while the gift of earthly life is still ours, we need to ask ourselves, how is our relationship with God? Do we love our neighbors as ourselves? Are we relieving the suffering of others or just pointing our fingers at them and trying to connect the dots between their suffering and sin?

Our own repentance is the issue, because deserving isn’t. The scandal at the heart of our faith is that God already loves us; that God doesn’t need a ledger or tally sheet because we don’t do anything to deserve God’s love. We have no favor to earn, because God already sees us as God’s beloved ones. All we have to do is live and explore the amazing mystery of our acceptance. We can’t lose God’s favor and make bad things happen to us because we don’t earn God’s favor in the first place.

Life is short. Don’t be distracted by the wrong questions. And don’t be disappointed if Jesus asks you to love God more than you love answers. Because Jesus will do that. When people asked

him questions he often responded not with an answer, but with a story. Like he did in the next part of the Gospel lesson.

A man planted a fig tree. The fig tree used up a lot of nutrients but didn't produce any figs. "Why should I let this do-nothing fig tree use up good soil?" asked the man. "Cut it down." But the gardener replies, "Let it be for one more year. I will do everything I can for it. If it bears fruit, great! If not, cut it down."

The gardener in this story is not efficient, practical, or exercising his authority to do what's most logical. He's going to waste more nutrients, efforts, and space on a tree that doesn't show any signs of producing figs.

Does the fig tree deserve it?

That's not the question. It's just a story about a fig tree and an extravagant gardener who should remind us of another gardener from way back in the beginning, who just couldn't help it when he picked up some dirt. God just had to form it into a human and breathe life into it. God just had to make it into someone to love, someone who would be free to choose to love in return. Maybe we can hear this gardener at work in our own lives, saying, "Wait. Give me another year. I'll do all that I can to nurture this tree."

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