

+ Luke 13:1-9 + The Garden of Repentance¹ + Lenten Midweek #2 + 13 March 2014 +

Last week we heard God announce in the Garden of Eden the very first promise to send us a Savior. Time and time again over the centuries, God has announced that promise of salvation in Christ to the whole world even to us today, but what is God's objective in proclaiming Christ to us?

Consider for a moment. Why was there a 9/11? Why was the Eastern seaboard slammed with Superstorm Sandy and places like Oklahoma City with killer tornadoes in 2013? Why have there been so many school shootings, especially the awful tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT? Why does cancer take the lives of so many young and old?

Is it God's judgment on all those people for being sinners? Now in a general sense we all do suffer because of sin. We all face the consequences of sin. We all deal with the effects of living in a corrupt and sinful world, and we all deserve the wages of sin—that is, death, but we cannot read the mind of God to know why certain people suffer in particularly harsh ways. That's a mystery hidden in God's unsearchable will.

If you have not suffered a tragedy like these, does that mean you and I are innocent or at least less sinful? No. We're no less sinful than people who suffer tragedy. Rather, God makes it clear in his Word that he wants all of us to take tragic events to heart. He wants such events to strike fear so we examine our hearts and lives for sin and then repent, because he wants us to turn away from the path that leads to death and live.

Part of the problem that stands in the way of us having a relationship with God is that we tend to think we're fine just the way we are. In his Word, God describes who we are by nature as being totally evil and incapable of good down to the tiniest fiber of our being. Unfortunately, we don't realize that or feel it in ourselves. In fact, we usually feel quite justified in what we do.

Part of this may be due to how we (and most other people) think of God. We don't usually feel his anger. Rather than live with an expectation or even foreboding that the holy God is going to come at any time to judge the living and the dead—a perspective that was common among the generations before us, we tend to think of God as a big friend. In a sense, our sinfulness is something that has to be believed rather than felt.

For that reason, God may allow bad things to wake you up to what your situation really is. If sinfulness in general can bring on horrible things like car accidents, disease, earthquakes, and loneliness here on earth, it is downright scary to imagine what kind of punishment our sins would bring on us from the hand of the holy God for eternity in hell.

That's the point Jesus makes in Luke 13. He doesn't want you to think, "Hah! Those people are getting what they deserve!" when you hear about or see another earthly tragedy or disaster. No, Jesus wants you to say, "Lord, have mercy on *me!*" Consider Jesus' words in **Luke 13:1-5...**

Yet Jesus doesn't want us to see our God just as a holy Judge. He uses a parable about a garden to illustrate God's loving patience with us. We might call it **the Garden of Repentance**. Jesus explains, ***"A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'"***

Consider the amazing patience of the gardener: ***"'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"*** So the owner gives the tree another year. Granted, if the tree doesn't bear fruit, the gardener will cut it down, but this man is in no hurry. He puts it off almost like he wants to avoid harming the tree. Yet the real reason the gardener puts it off is to give it a little more tender, loving care than he had before. He wants to give the tree every chance before it's time of grace is over.

When you see or hear about some tragedy, rather than think, "How could a loving God do that to those people?", look at it with the eyes of a child of God who has received God's mercy. "Look how patient God has been with *me!* Because of his mercy, he has not cut me down, even though I'm no better than those poor people. I'm sorry for their pain, and I'll do what I can to help them, but at the same time, I can be grateful that God has given me another day to repent, another day to find where sin still exists in my life and get rid of it, another day to seek and be assured of his forgiveness, another day to serve him with my life because I am

¹ Some of the thoughts and language of this sermon were adapted from the 2014 Lenten sermon series – From Garden to Glory – produced by Northwestern Publishing House.

forgiven, another day to tell others the good news of how God has rescued us from horrible things like sin and tragedy and death and hell so that they might believe it too.”

My friends, that's why the Savior came. That's what Lent is all about. Jesus took on himself the punishment that was coming to you from God. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, God aimed all of his divine, holy anger at Jesus. By Jesus' death on a cross, God's justice on the human race, on us was served. God declares you and me and all people forgiven in Christ.

All who rely on Jesus as their Savior now have God as their friend. That includes you! Through faith in Jesus, your sins are forgiven. Through faith in Jesus, tragedy, even personal tragedy, is not a punishment for your sin, but is transformed into God's loving governance for your good or the good of others. For all who rely on Jesus, even death itself becomes nothing more than a joyful sleep from which you will awake to live with Christ forever in paradise. As you rely on Jesus, you can take comfort in the reality that God has nothing, but the most loving intentions for you. He is even reluctant to bring the world to its end because he wants you and all people to have the opportunity to hear the good news of his Word and believe in Jesus as their Savior.

How, then, can you turn away from eternal death and turn back to life in Christ? How can you know you have God's forgiveness? God himself meets you through his Word, whether written in the Bible or spoken, or through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, or through the forgiving meal of his Holy Supper. That's where God gives you his forgiveness and where his Spirit changes your perspective on everything. No longer do you live under the threat and foreboding of God's holy judgment, but rather you live under the joyful shelter of God's love. Through Word and water and meal, the holy Gardener nurtures and fertilizes you week after week, month after month, year after year so you can grow strong with deep roots in the Savior's love and power. That's the food by which the Holy Spirit keeps your reliance on Jesus alive and keeps your relationship with God alive.

A hymnwriter by the name of Erdmann Neumeister once penned the following words of confidence: **“God's own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized into Christ! He, because I could not pay it, gave my full redemption price. Do I need earth's treasures many? I have one worth more than any that brought me salvation free, lasting to eternity!”** (*Christian Worship Supplement* 737:1) To those words of confidence, you could add, “I am God's forgiven child. I have it heard from the mouth of my pastor with the Gospel words of forgiveness and grace. I have received Christ's own body and blood in his Holy Supper. I am forgiven. I am redeemed. I am loved by God. I don't need to fear anything that might happen to me on this earth.” So we keep coming back for more, and God keeps giving it to us through his Word and Sacraments. That way we stay green and alive and fruitful in our relationship with him.

It was in a garden, by a tree, that sin first entered the world and was passed down from generation to generation to you and me today. It was on a tree that Jesus died and paid for the sins of the whole world, even yours and mine. By giving us faith in Christ, God now makes each of us a living tree that thrives and bears abundant fruit in his Garden of Repentance. Amen.