

Copyright March 20, 2022. Geist Christian Church. All Rights Reserved.

Title: Good Enough: Not So Fast

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

Text: [Luke 13:1-9](#)

E-mail: [Ryan Hazen](#)

[Watch the service.](#)



I usually try to start a sermon with something to catch your attention. Maybe a joke or a funny story. A preaching professor once said, "you can't just start talking – no one will listen." I usually try to heed that advice but as I watched the news this week, I just didn't have it in me. No jokes this week or for this scripture – no funny

stories. I've felt a little like the writers of late-night TV comedy like Saturday Night Live when interviewed about how their profession changes during catastrophes. They said the hardest assignments are knowing what to do immediately after a common tragedy like 9/11 or the Boston Marathon bombing.

I've watched the news from Ukraine these past four weeks and felt helpless – perhaps you join me in that feeling. Unprovoked attacks on civilians – hundreds dead – targeted really. Journalists dead and injured, families separated, people fleeing with only the possessions they can carry. And it's not just Ukraine – Ukraine is just the most recent and the most galling at the moment. Other news makes me feel helpless too. There are wildfires in the West and tornados in the Midwest. Floods throughout the world. Gun violence. It's a lot. It's overwhelming. All wreaking havoc and changing lives forever. It's a burden to carry and almost no one among us, except perhaps our soldiers over the years, have ever had to run from a falling bomb or carry what we own on our back. That is without even mentioning the 25,000 people, including more than 10,000 children who, according to the United Nations World Food Program, die every day from hunger and related causes.¹

In every one of those deaths, whether by hunger or war or natural disaster or tragic accident, families and loved ones grieved. In every one. And at some level, everyone probably asked the same question: "Why?" It just doesn't seem fair. What had any of the dead done to deserve such tragic deaths? It's the question that Rabbi Harold Kushner attempted to answer in his 1981 wildly popular book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Kushner had firsthand experience. In 1977, his son, Aaron, died of an incurable genetic disease at the age of 14.²

The question that Kushner asked and the question that we pose on this day as war rages is the same one that Jesus addresses to begin our scripture reading for today in Luke 13. In Jesus' day, it wasn't a question about fairness. The assumption was that disease, suffering, and death bore a direct correlation with human sinfulness. The greater the sin, the more likely the misfortune. And to some degree, like it or not, we still think this way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in hopes that we can change what we are doing and stop whatever has gone or is going wrong. Sometimes, many times, we need someone to blame.

What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives. It was no different in Jesus' time. People longed to understand and control misfortune. That's where Luke 13 begins. The crowds asked Jesus about two different stories that were the news of the day where it was clear that innocent people were killed.

First, the Galileans were murdered by Pilate, and next, those who were killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed. What had those people done to deserve their fate? These two events were probably familiar to ancient audiences but the details, over time, have been lost. Luke is our only source of information about these tragedies. We don't know any more about them than this but we can use some patterns of behavior to fill in some details.³

The grisly mention of Pilate's mingling the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices appears to refer to a massacre of a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. We don't know why Pilate slaughtered these people, but the deed nevertheless corresponds with other historical writings that tell about Pilate's penchant for brutality. The verse offers an ominous foreshadowing of the Roman governor in advance of his appearance yet to come in the trial of Jesus. One scholar, writing on this passage last week, said he could not help but see the parallel to what Putin is doing in Ukraine and Pilate's massacre of the Galileans. Not waging war against a military but against civilians who were seeking nothing more than to live their life.

As to the collapse of the tower, we know even less. Siloam was a neighborhood just south of Jerusalem's old city. Walls around cities or neighborhoods would have had towers used as lookouts. A structure collapsed without warning and crushed eighteen unsuspecting residents. Jesus uses these two calamities that would have been topics of conversation

around the local watering hole – one an instance of state-sanctioned terror, one a random accident – to disconnect the idea that suffering is a result of sin.

Both incidents saw people killed with little warning and for no apparent reason. Both events remind the rest of us how precarious our existence is. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong, did nothing themselves that caused their demise. He characterizes life as fragile and wants to emphasize that we do not know what tomorrow has in store for any of us. For him - he's on his way to the cross. For us, the order of our lives can be upset in an instant. An accident, a diagnosis, a disaster, a war.

Jesus works hard then and now to put to rest the fake news that tragedy is somehow related to divine punishment. It's not. Jesus says it to you. I say it to you. Sin does not make atrocities happen. They just come. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims, and "why?" questions to address those who, thus far, have navigated the hazards before us. Just as we should not equate sin with punishment, we should not mistake our good fortune as evidence of God's special blessing.

What Jesus wants to get around to talking about is repentance. The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors. When Jesus says, twice, "unless you repent you will all perish", he does not promise that the godless will be struck by an asteroid. He refers to death in a spiritual sense, destruction of one's soul. He emphasizes the suddenness with which this death comes. Just as Pilate's and the tower's victims did not enjoy the luxury of choosing the time of their demise, likewise the unrepentant may suddenly find they have delayed too long and are themselves lost.

Jesus seems less than pastoral in his response. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." (Luke 13:2-5)

Jesus says that death is always close and not necessarily controllable or explainable. Death happens, he says. It can happen when you're praying. It can happen when you're standing under a wall. It can catch you by surprise. And though you might intend to get right with God a little closer to the end of your life, sometimes circumstances just won't allow for that.

It is repentance – a turning from their sin – that Jesus wants for those listening that day. Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on you, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what's right in the eyes of God. To make that point, Jesus tells a parable. It is not exactly a warm and fuzzy parable. It is a parable that underscores God's judgment, yes – but in my mind, it's as much about the offer of God's grace with a dash of urgency thrown in.

He tells the story of a fig tree that is not producing and how the landowner has grown impatient with its inability to bear fruit. He proposes cutting the tree down. But the gardener argues for a one-year reprieve. Let me work with the tree for one more year, he asks, and then, if it does not produce fruit, we can cut it down. It is a parable of God's justice in creative tension with God's mercy. Grace is offered but don't dawdle in your acceptance of it. It seems that the parable of the fig tree invites us to consider another year of life as a real gift.

The parable of the fig tree helps place God's judgment and God's grace into a larger perspective. In the larger scheme of things, God's grace is greater than God's judgment. How could it be otherwise? Divine patience is simply another expression of God's love and grace. Did you hear the offer of good news?

"I'm going to do everything I can to help this tree live and bear fruit. I'm going to find every way possible to get to hearts that are as hard as packed down soil." Jesus wants us to live. Jesus says, "not so fast." His passion is marked for us by great urgency--don't wait! Look at your life and dare to ask the hard questions. Am I stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Am I so busy making a living that I've forgotten to make a life? Jesus digs at us with questions like these. Such questions, like the parable of the fig tree, should move us toward change.

The gardener is going to use this year to work on you. I'll let you in on a secret. The gardener is Jesus. He's here giving you another chance. Jesus will be working so hard with you this year so that you will bear fruit. "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it." (Luke 13:8). Well, that may not be the best image – getting manure thrown on us – but you get the idea. Jesus will do everything – give you everything you need to thrive.

"Why?" we ask. "Why did this happen to them? Why did this happen to me?" There is probably no good reason. Bad and good things happen all the time. The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest

when Jesus was put on the cross. The more crucial question is, in all circumstances of joy and pain, can you trust God to be God? Can you love God without linking such love to the good or bad things that come your way in life?

There are no easy answers to life's tough questions. The church of Jesus Christ is not built upon easy answers. Instead, it is built upon a singular recognition. A recognition that through Jesus Christ we get a God whose love challenges and enables us to live without all the answers, a God who is willing to dig around our hearts, patiently encouraging us toward repentance and faithfulness and fruitfulness. We get a God who has given God's whole life to us so that we might come to learn how to give our lives to God more fully. Beyond what's fair, that seems to me to be a pretty good deal.

One more thing. Do you know when we'll meet this gardener again? He'll be here on Easter telling Mary that he is risen.

¹ Article by John Holmes in UN Chronicle published by the United Nations. Found online at www.un.org.

² Information on Kushner's son found at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/When_Bad_Things_Happen_to_Good_People

³ Commentary help for this sermon primarily used Matt Skinner, Commentary on Luke 13:1-9, February 28, 2016 found at www.workingpreacher.org.