

St. Matthew's Church

NEW YORK CITY

YOU CAN RUN: BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE

Luke 13:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2010

Jesus simply was not in the habit of telling people what they wanted to hear. And as Luke further reveals in chapter 13, the Lord became even more aggressive. And people, except for the most committed, did not like it. And yet everyone needed to hear what Jesus had to say. And the same goes for us today.

The Galilean Atrocity: Jesus' teaching heated up when some of his listeners brought up a recent atrocity: "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." As best we can reconstruct the bloodshed, this took place in the temple at Passover, because that was the only time laymen, Galilean or otherwise, were involved in the slaughter of animal sacrifices. So the victims were Galilean pilgrims offering Passover sacrifices in the temple. Evidently Pilate thought they were guilty of sedition and had his soldiers fall upon them when they least expected. In the ensuing melee human blood mixed with lambs' blood in an appalling bouquet.

Everyone knew of the event, but the reason it was mentioned to Jesus is that it was generally believed that victims of calamities and misfortunes were guilty of extraordinary sins that they had kept hidden. This kind of thinking is found in John 9:1-2: "As he (Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" It was obvious to them that the man's misfortune was due to someone's sin. Also, Job's "comforters" earned their ironic title by expounding repeatedly on this theme, beginning in Job 4:7 with the question, "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Were the upright ever destroyed?"

This was an attractive way to think about life for those who had been spared adversity. Their goodness, their moral superiority, had spared them! It was all so very neat, and so self-satisfying. We thrill to this time-worn religious

game. Get the focus off the self. Blame the other. “Come on, Jesus, expound on the moral inadequacies of those Galileans who met such scandalous deaths, so we can further sanctify our souls.” Jesus refused to play their game. With laser-like speed Jesus spotlights this wrong-headedness. Jesus cauterizes the gossip that fascinates the bystander, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” It’s a stiletto in the gut, a halogen lamp in the face.

Aiming at all of us, front and center; God’s eyes focused on us, in a way we don’t like. Guilt, gossip, and responsibility put us front and center. Not the next person. We prefer they honor our dignity. We prefer their respect. We prefer talk of “reaching our full growth potential.” We are individuals and ought to be honored as such. God’s response, “Except you repent, you will all perish in the same way.” Jesus was not denying that sin sometimes brings tragedy, because it does (Matthew 9:2). But he flatly refused the idea that all tragedy is due to the sins of its victims. In fact, he emphatically answered those who wondered about whose sin caused the man’s blindness by saying, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” This speaks to the misguided tendency of so many ill-informed Christians who heap imagined guilt upon themselves for the calamities that have befallen their children or other loved ones. We must accept reality. Death happens. Tragedies come to all. Sometimes unthinkable things befall the most godly and committed.

The Judean Accidents: Jesus strengthened the impact of his point by citing another incident: “Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them; do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Many believe that the tower stood at the juncture of the south and east walls of Jerusalem and may have fallen during the construction of an aqueduct from the reservoir of Siloam to improve the water supply. Some of Jesus’ listeners could have argued that the Galileans had “asked for” such tragedy from Pilate due to their political activity and thus were morally culpable, but no one could say the same about the random deaths from the collapse of the tower of Siloam.

Jesus wanted to be sure he got his point across. “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them; do you think they were more guilty than all the other living in Jerusalem?” His answer was emphatic. “I tell you no!...I tell you, no!”

Jesus could not have put it more forcefully. Those who died were run-of-the-mill sinners like the rest of us.

Jesus assumed and taught the universality of sin; and of death as its consequence. We are all sinners; sure there are differences between us sinners, but the reality is we all “fall short of the glory of God.” Saint Paul does not let us escape: “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ.”

“Nevertheless!” A daunting Nevertheless. The Corinthian ancestors were as thoroughly and as genuinely credentialed as they possibly could be with God and with Christ, no less. “*All* were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. *All* ate the same spiritual food. *All* drank the same spiritual drink. They (*all*) drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, *and the Rock was Christ!*” Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. They were struck down in the wilderness.

Then follows the catalog of destructions; and no category of: “Are they more wicked than all the rest?” “Do not desire evil, do not become idolaters and do not indulge in sexual immorality; do not put Christ to the test; do not complain.” Complaining, murmuring, is equated with sexual immorality. In sins, God has no Dow Jones index of nuanced differences. The point is, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” The Lord’s Supper and Baptism are not like the Salk polio vaccine, one shot and you are safe for life.

Real earnestness in our questions in the matter of disasters and pain focuses us on the mercy of God only. This same God who warns us to place our confidence only in God’s mercy is the same one who says: “No testing has overtaken you which is not common to everyone. God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” Kierkegaard had some good advice on reading the Scriptures. As we read, study, reflect, and experience, we should always say; “It’s talking to me. It is taking about me. That is real earnestness.”

The Unproductive Fig Tree: The parable of the unproductive fig tree reaffirms that God is faithful, that God is merciful. The fig tree had full opportunity to produce. That's what the three years means. Despite the clear evidence that the tree has been "wicked" and has no right to stand, God, the gardener, pleads with owner for yet more time, really all the time in the world so that God may have time to cultivate and fertilize it, to provide intensive care with the hope that it will then produce.

God agonizes that we not miss out on his mercy. That's the story of Christ. God abandons the son so as not to abandon us. Christ is executed as a criminal to free us from our crimes against God. The humiliation of the crucifixion becomes Christ's coronation.

If the Lord does not return while we are here on earth, we are all going to die. Some of us will live more than three score or four score years. Some of us will die much sooner due to weakness, illness, trauma, or violence. It is no secret, and never has been. Many things have been hidden from the minds of men, but it has always been made entirely clear that they are going to die. The day is coming when all our earthly possessions will be swept away, including our ability to enjoy and even perceive them, and our very flesh will be required of us. The earth will close over our skins and they will be like a brown, crumbling leaf that blows away and vanishes.

"That God has died for me." There is nothing more amazing than that. That God is so compassionate means God's death for my life. Nothing is more amazing than that. Our task is to keep that sense of amazement alive.

We need not perish. We need to repent.