

## Calamity, Evil and Response-Ability

Luke 13 : 1-5

You may not have heard a sermon on this text, but I think it is most relevant to our day and to our lives. It's about the calamities of life; it's about three kinds of evil in the world; and it is about US!

### I

People came to Jesus with some terrible news from the *Jerusalem Post*. The local Roman ruler, Pilate, known for his cruelty, had slaughtered Galileans as they made their animal sacrifices at worship and mingled their blood with the blood of their sacrifices. Good, faithful Jews slaughtered as they worshipped. We've had scenes like this in synagogues and churches and mosques in America these past decades. Hate is a murderer.

One of them said to Jesus, "Do you think because these Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" The question may make us shiver. We've had too many TV preachers tell us that one calamity after another has been God's judgment on people's sins. One notable T.V. preacher said a terrible destructive hurricane in New Orleans a couple of decades ago was God's judgment on the city because of the large numbers of homosexuals and sex workers there. Breathtakingly cruel theology. If so, God had a bad aim.

Churches were destroyed, but the brothels mostly were unscathed. Of course this is terrible theology, in Jesus' day and ours. To connect all suffering with sin is a cruel kind of religion. I think a truer picture of life, sin and suffering would be to say: *"All sin brings suffering, but not suffering comes from sin."*

The ones who came to Jesus were all too ready to assign sin as the reason for the calamity. It was what they had been taught. Jesus had no patience with such theology and said to them: "I tell you, No!" (The Greek suggests Jesus raised his voice!) Then he added these words of tough love: "But unless you repent, turn, reform your lives, receive a new mind, you will perish as they did." I'll probe this more deeply later.

Then Jesus added his own calamity story to the discussion: "How about those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem?" And then he repeated the word of warning: "No, I say to you! But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Here is Jesus, *not* so "meek and mild."

## II

Jesus refused to link all suffering with sin. But his words lead us to ponder what has confounded our minds and our faith through the centuries, what is called "The Problem of Evil."

Why is there such terrible suffering in history if God is a good God? The whole book of Job, as well as many Psalms, ponder the question: “Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?” As Rabbi Kushner’s famous book asked: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

Archibald McLeish’s play, *J.B.*, based on the book of Job, states the problem plainly:

If God is God, he is not good.

If God is good, he is not God.

Frederick Buechner states the theological problem this way: ponder three propositions:

God is all-powerful

God is all-good

Terrible things happen

You can reconcile two of these statements but not all three. If God is all-powerful and all-good why would terrible things happen?

Theologians today are re-forming their theology to say that God is not all-powerful, at least in the ways we’ve thought before. It is through the power of love alone that God is redeeming the world.

These questions have been around for millennia. We've tried to solve this theological problem, but the questions have not gone away. And our answers often appear too facile.

### III

Through the years theologians have addressed the problem of evil by defining evil in three categories. The first is called "natural evil". We might better call it natural calamity. Why are there hurricanes, snakes and diseases? Insurance policies have tended to call natural calamities "acts of God"! A slander on God. These things happen by a contingency of many factors, mostly outside our human control.

The second category is "personal evil". We all know what that is: deeds that destroy others, acts of cruelty that demean others, the harm we bring when we act sinfully. As the Iona Confession puts it: the "ways we wound ourselves, wound others and wound the life of the world." We are talking about sin and there are a bunch of them. As Pogo said in a comic strip: "We have faults we have hardly used yet!"

The third category is "historical evil." This is the evil imbedded in social and political structures, often passed down from generation to generation. Scripture puts it this way: "The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on

edge.” We call this today “structural sin” or “systemic sin”, as in systemic racism and systemic sexism and systemic injustice. The church has most often avoided this category as a way of avoiding responsibility. The only allowable category of sin was personal sin, and how we have loved to talk about that! We wouldn’t let ourselves consider the possibility of our participation in structural evil. Some preachers and politicians say it doesn’t even exist!

#### IV

So let’s go back to our episode in Luke. The massacre of the innocent Galileans was a form of both personal evil, the evil Pilate did, and historical evil, the evil of the Empire that sought to rule the world with cruelty and might. Pilate was a cog in that wheel.

The deaths of the eighteen people in Jerusalem when the tower fell on them was natural evil. A great wind caused it to collapse. If, of course, the builders of the tower skimped on the construction plans to save money, we are back to the other categories of evil. But for now, let’s consider the deaths of the eighteen as deaths by natural calamity, or natural evil.

Sometimes there is a perfect storm of all three. When hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the hurricane was natural evil. But what about the inadequate infrastructure to protect the city. The levees did not hold. And what about the

city's development over the years that consigned the poor and black citizens to the areas most vulnerable to flooding? Natural, historical and personal evil all combined.

So, this has been a little exercise in thinking about the forms of evil, some categories to think with that might be helpful.

But when Jesus was confronted with the problem of evil in Pilate's slaughter of the Galileans at worship, he didn't stroke his beard and say, "This is a deep theological mystery to ponder". He said, "What about you?!"

Jesus won't leave us here pondering theological and social issues. He says to us, Stop speculating on other's sins and the calamities of life, look at your own life! Unless you repent, turn around, reform your lives, you will perish too.

That's what I meant when I said that Jesus gives us some tough love here.

In other words, stop making judgments about others, look at our own life. You may be in more danger than you know. Turn off the TV, Facebook, Twitter, and all other social media that bring to our awareness all the slaughters of the innocent, the personal sins , the systemic sins , the natural calamities that keep us spectators on other's lives and keep us from looking deeply at our own lives .

The desert fathers and mothers fled the cities in the early centuries after Christ. They believed the only way to save their souls was to go to the desert and

be alone with God. Here was what happened. First, with no one else around to judge and blame, they had only themselves to deal with, and in that crucible of aloneness they came into contact with their own sin and culpability. Secondly, what they experienced from God was complete forgiveness and a compassion they had never known or even imagined. And third, when they returned to the cities they came back with a compassion and an understanding of others they had never had, the compassion and understanding of God.

Do you hear any good news for you in their stories?

And here is where I bring in that word that can sound so dreary and demanding: responsibility.

For the title of the sermon I have spelled it: Response- Ability. That is, the ability to respond to what you most need and the world most needs. Start with compassion and forgiveness for you, and then others. Ask what compassion means in the world of structural sin. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner Eli Wiesel has said: *"We are not all guilty, but we are all responsible."* We do what we can for others. We refuse what Wiesel considered perhaps the most grievous problem in our world, the sin of indifference.

Now that word "repent". It is a formidable word. It's hard to cozy up with. But it can bring life. The Greek word means to be given a new mind. The Hebrew

word means to turn around. It invites us to look at ourselves with what the Recovery Movement calls a “fearless moral inventory.” It can show us how to amend our lives and make amends. And it will bring us into Compassion of God who will send us into the world with that same compassion.

To use the hillbilly King James English: “So mote it be.”:

Amen