

Sermon ☩ March 20, 2022

Luke 13:1-9

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Why is it . . . according to insurance company lingo . . . that natural catastrophes such as tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods are called "*acts of God*" . . . while sunshine, rainbows, gentle falling snow, and spring flowers are the work "Mother Nature"? Why does it work that way?

Apparently, somewhere along the way, we have conceived that God is a stern judge, a divine punisher, who sends calamities as penalty for sins. Tragedy is most often thought of as being tied somehow to the ultimate *will of God*. Even when we are kidding we say things like, "*God will get you for that!*"

Leslie Weatherhead, in *The Will of God*, attacks this kind of thinking. In the book, he relates a true incident from his life:

“When I was in India I was standing on the veranda of an Indian home darkened in bereavement. My Indian friend had lost his son, the light of his eyes, in a cholera epidemic. At the far end of the veranda his little daughter, the only remaining child, slept in a cot covered with mosquito netting.

We paced up and down, and I tried in my clumsy way to console him. But he said, '*Well, padre, it is the will of God. That's all there is to it. It the will of God.*'

Fortunately, I knew him well enough to be able to reply without being misunderstood, and I said something like this: '*Supposing someone crept up the steps onto the veranda tonight, while you slept, and deliberately put a wad of cotton soaked in cholera germ culture over your little girl's mouth as she lay in that cot on the veranda, what would you think about that?*'

'*My God,*' he said, '*what would I think about that? Nobody would do such damnable thing. If he attempted it and I caught him, I would kill him with as little compunction as I would a snake. What do you mean by suggesting such a thing?*'

Weatherhead continues: '*But John,*' I said quietly, '*isn't that what you just accused God of doing when you said it is his will? Call your little boy's death the result of mass ignorance, call mass folly, call it mass sin, if you like, call it bad drains or communal carelessness, but don't call it the will of God.*'

And then Weatherhead concludes: '*Surely we cannot identify as the will of God something for which another person would be locked up in jail or put in a mental institution.*'”

How often we want to blame God for tragedy when it strikes.

Perhaps it's because we feel that we must blame someone for personal loss or tragedy that is beyond our control.

And we dare not blame ourselves. So . . . we blame God. We say, "The universe is God's creation. God could *have* prevented my tragedy if God wanted."

All of this was probably in the back of the people's minds who came to Jesus and told him about a group of Galileans who were set upon by some of Pontius Pilate's men and killed as they were offering sacrifices to God. The people wondered if such a tragic act could have been the will of God.

Jesus perceived their inquiry to mean that they believed the Galileans had been punished by God for some secret sin. But Jesus replied that if God punished us in this life for our sins . . . there would be no one who would be able to escape God's wrath. And in a contrasting thought, at another time, Jesus said that God "*makes the sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do right and those who wrong.*"

It is not always easy to discern, by looking at an event, what is the will of God and whether an event is good or bad. Not everything that happens to us controlled by God. . . . it's that old "free will" thing. Sometimes it is nearly impossible to distinguish between the will of God or the will of humankind or even just a quirk of nature. And sometimes . . . often times . . . we blame God for something that happens when is really our faith that is faltering.

It is God's will that we try to move back to the direction of the garden. If the parables are any indication, it is God's will that we be well. It is God's will that we be whole. It is God's will that we know God's love.

But, because God is not in charge of every minute detail of life, there are things that get in the way. Things like disease. Things like accidents. Things like natural disasters.

And, to be sure, such things test our faith. And it is when our faith falters that we tend to blame others. And when it is a really major disaster, we point a finger at God. When we do this, we misunderstand the will of God . . . the very nature of God.

But all is not lost, there are a few things that we can do to keep from allowing our faith to falter. Need to keep "connected" to God. Participate in worship on regular basis. Grow in your faith . . . get involved in some kind of organized Bible study. Pray. . . but not some shopping list of wants and needs.

Watch the pitfalls . . .

There is no "quick fix"

The sun will continue to shine on good and bad alike.

And . . . be patient. The love of God is constant.

William Temple reminded us of this long ago when he wrote:

"While we deliberate, God reigns;

when we decide wisely, God reigns;

when we decide foolishly, God reigns;

when we serve God in humble loyalty, God reigns;

when serve God self-assertively, God reigns;

when we rebel and seek to withhold our service, God reigns . . .

God . . . the Alpha and Omega,

which is and was and is come, the Almighty."