

“Our Graceful Gardener” based on Luke 13:1-9, David Jahnke, 3/7/10

Let us pray— God of our years, you are always there, calling us to you. Help us to turn and open ourselves to the graceful and holy Word you have for us. As a loving parent, you only want the best for us so help us to trust this and entrust ourselves to you more and more.

A church member recently wrote to me about a rather feeble explanation that she read regarding why evil plagues creation as it does. Especially confounding to her was why the innocent would be struck. Her striving to understand where God is in all of this suffering is commendable.

I am guessing this kind of spiritual curiosity was behind the questions of those who approached Jesus about why God would allow Galilean Jews who were in the midst of offering sacrifices to be murdered by Pilate.

A traditional explanation was that the Galileans must have sinned in some way. But it hardly makes sense that faithful Jews who were in the midst of atoning for sins would be punished. Or perhaps they were zealots who were seeking to free Israel from occupation. But this would seem admirable and courageous to most Israelites. And while Jesus opposed such revolutionary zeal, he does not condemn them, whether they were zealots or simply observant Jews.

Jesus said, “These Galileans were not worse sinners than others.” He makes clear that we usually cannot make a direct one-to-one correlation between tragedy and sin.

Then Jesus takes advantage of the question to extend mercy to those the crowd would have condemned. He brings up the fall of the Tower of Siloam. Many scholars think this tower was a Roman aqueduct which fed or drew from the Pool of Siloam. So that the people working on it who were killed were serving Rome and gaining from the Roman occupation. And yet again, Jesus refuses to say that they were worse sinners than other citizens of Jerusalem. Just as the sun and the rain fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous, so too does tragedy befall both the righteous and unrighteous whose earthly destinies are often intertwined.

Addressing these questions begins with the incomprehensibility of God which we see reflected in what the Lord told Isaiah. <sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts,”

And in what the Lord said to his faithful and yet suffering servant Job, <sup>4</sup> "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. <sup>5</sup> Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!"

And in one last critical question, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

We must not reach rash and simplistic conclusions about tragic events as they relate to God and God’s people. Jesus provides no simple answer. And scripture is far from uniform in how it addresses this profound question. But for me, the best answer is found in the life and death of Christ. Because while God *is* beyond creation and mysteriously guiding it-- the birth, and life of Jesus proclaim that God is also going through all of this with us, rather than simply controlling things from above. Even more to the point, Jesus’ death proclaims that our heavenly judge ultimately let the judgment fall upon himself rather than impose a death or a prison sentence upon us defendants.

We see this heralded in Jesus’ answer to the crowd. In refusing to blame the victims for the tragedies that befell them, Jesus points to God’s compassion. Instead of viewing this inquiry from above as judge, he levels the playing field among the listeners and in so doing, exhibits mercy to the deceased. The apostle James says that with God, mercy triumphs over judgment which is perhaps the most important truth that Jesus reveals to us about God.

But then Jesus complicates the situation. He says, “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Hmm...Here are a couple of responses. First off, Jesus is saying, “Pay attention to where your own heart is rather than judging others or speculating about them.”

Secondly, we will all perish. The question is will we have patterned our lives in such a way as to be able to turn away from what scripture calls the second death. Will be so accustomed to turning to God— so accustomed to regretting sin, wanting transformation and receiving mercy that we will run into the loving arms of God when we pass from this life?

Jesus' warning to repent—to turn-- is preparation for the eternal turn to God at our death. And if we are not ready to sprint to God, Jesus is going to be right there looking at us with a smile, whispering in our ear, putting his arm around our shoulders and gently nudging us on. But even then, we must not close our eyes or close off our ears or remain huddled and turned away in fear of the love and the life that awaits!

The implications for this lifetime are beyond measure.

Jesus tells a parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 13:7 So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

During my wayward days in college, a philosophy professor whom I loved lifted me up in class in order to cut me down to size and teach me a lesson. With a smile, he spoke of my solid contributions *when* I came to class and participated. I did not mind the little rib. I remember kind of looking around the class like Rodney Dangerfield finally getting some respect. And then, with a wink, he added, "How unfortunate it is that so much of David's time is spent "wasted" ...

We were created from the foundations of the earth to bear fruit for the world! When we sense no deep-rooted purpose; when we let our days go by with little thought to the profound good we were created for— then we are simply wasting the good soil from which we were created; and wasting opportunities to bear the good fruit for which we were created.

Thanks be to God, the gardener who cares for us has such love and shows such grace to his trees. 13:8 For the gardner replies to the impatient landowner in Jesus' parable, 'Sir, let the fig tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. 13:9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down...

I heard this week of church members who had seen some unique apple trees while abroad on a trip. The apples grew directly out of the trunk. When they got home, they bought a couple of them. And every fall around harvest time, they would hope and wait expectantly for apples...which never came. After a few years, the wife's patience ran out and she told her

husband it was time to get rid of the trees...Her husband played the role of the graceful gardener. Give 'em another year or two.

I really wish this story had a happy ending. But year after year the trees produced nothing but a few lame tiny apples. And when this couple moved, the new owners found no use for the trees and did chop them down— poor fellas.

The parable and illustration point to time limits on bearing fruit. This is an uncomfortable reality. But as the years pass, the truth of our limited time; and the need for turning our lives around if we have not been bearing fruit; these become more urgently apparent. And while turning our lives in a new direction is very hard, the sooner we start, the easier it becomes over time. And the nourishment that the gardner provides as we turn to receive living water and receive the precious light of the Son! I so want people to know the blessings of life in the Spirit!

One last illustration. I am up to Netflix disc 4 in the t.v. series Mad Men. Mr. Sterling, the owner of the advertising company had a heart attack while fooling around with a young model. All grey and gaunt-looking at the hospital, he asks Don Draper, “Do you believe in energy?” Draper asks back, “What, like, energy that makes you ‘get up and go’?” “No,” says Sterling, “Human energy...like y’know a soul?” “What do you want me to say?” says Draper. Sterling-- “I have been living the last 20 years like I have been on shore leave the whole time...What is that?” “It’s living, like you said,” says Draper who lives as if he is on shore leave as well. Sterling, shaking his head—“God...I wish I was going somewhere!”

From my point of view, there are two very clear paths set before us again and again in life. One is a self-centered path that leads to a dead end but we somehow miss the giant yellow diamond-shaped dead-end signs that God tries to show us again and again. When we do see them, however, a road suddenly appears which turns to God and leads to everlasting life. Thanks be to God for the graceful gardner who will be there to welcome us at the last fork in the road...and steer us into the Garden of life and love which was our beginning and will be our end. To the God of all grace who calls us to eternal union with Christ be all the power and the glory now and forever. And God’s people say...

