

Title: Misreading the Headlines
Text: Luke 13:1 - 9
Date: March 24, 2019

You have to be careful with people, because if they don't know the answer, they may well just make something up.

To put a point on this, for millennium people have been ascribing dark meanings when things in life don't go according to plan. The assumption seems to be that we live in a universe of rewards and punishments. That way of thinking is reflected within the Bible itself. The book of Job is a particularly eloquent case. Job suffered severe losses (family, property, and health), and he carried on a long verbal interchange with three friends (Job 3-28). According to Job's friends, he must have done something wrong to deserve his suffering.

One of the more egregious examples of misreading the headlines came in the wake of 9-11. Just two days after the horrific attacks in 2001, Pat Robertson welcomed the Rev. Jerry Falwell onto his 700 Club show to discuss the cause of the tragedy.

Falwell said, **"The ACLU has got to take a lot of blame for this. And I know I'll hear from them for this, but throwing God... successfully with the help of the federal court system... throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools, the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked and when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad... I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU . . . all of them who try to secularize America... I point the finger in their face and say you helped this happen."** Robertson's response to Falwell's venom? **"I totally concur."** A frightening mindset, if you ask me!

Alas, this tendency seems to have been built into human nature from the beginning. In Job, Eliphaz says, **"As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same."** (4:8) The implication is that Job must have brought on his trials himself. The desire to comfort by explanation is part of who we are as human beings.

Aside from pointing fingers at others, we often are just as prone to point a finger at ourselves. We lose a job / we get an unwelcome diagnosis / our child gets an unwelcome diagnosis – and our first response is, **"Why me? What did I do to deserve this?"**

Just as we have innumerable headlines that get people puffed up with their certainty in telling you just what is wrong with the world, apparently these same kinds of headlines were topics of conversation in Jesus' day as well. Verse 1 of our text today is essentially: **"OMG! Did you hear the ghastly story about how Pilate mixed the blood of Galileans with the blood of animals that were sacrificed? Unbelievable! What do you think of that?"** Verse 4 refers to another headline. **"Did you hear about those eighteen men who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Unbelievable! What do you think they did to deserve that?"**

As inadequate or unhelpful as it may appear to us, their sense of divine retribution gives them a sense of stability and order in a terribly confusing and crazy time. Better imagine that calamity comes from a punishing God, they may feel, than believe it comes from nowhere and is a sign of a chaotic and even meaningless world.

But in this passage Jesus says **"no"** to simplistic answers to deep and complex questions; **"no"** to attempts to solve deep troubles with quick fixes; and **no** to shallow theological thinking. Jesus confronts their bad theology head on. Jesus replies, **"Do you think that because these**

Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you.” And then, **“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.”**

This is related to the age-old question of **“Why do bad things happen to good people?”** Elsewhere Jesus reminds us God **“makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”** (Matthew 5:45) So Jesus does not go along with popular theory-mongering.

Now just between you and me, I would be just as happy to put a bow on things here and move on, but Jesus does complicate things a bit here. To be clear, he doesn't just say “no, these people who suffered these calamities were not worse offenders.” He goes on to say: **“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”** Ouch. That certainly doesn't sound very genteel! Jesus apparently hadn't taken Clinical Pastor Education training. That is certainly not the reply that they were expecting!

We have to realize that while we read these stories in isolation, it doesn't occur that way. In fact, we are entering an ongoing conversation midstream. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, teaching his disciples and the crowds as he goes. In chapter twelve he has told several potent parables on money and foolishness and on always being prepared. He concludes by suggesting that those listening are not just missing the point of his stories, but missing the boat altogether: **“You may be able to read the signs to predict the weather,”** he says, **“but you are utterly clueless about reading the signs of the times.”**

Basically, what is going on here is that Jesus turns this moment of public rumination of figuring out the signs of the times into a teaching moment. *This* is what prompts Jesus' telling this next parable about a gardener determined to tend a fruitless fig tree because he is open to a future possibility that he does not control or manage.

The scene is a familiar one, not only to landowners but to anyone who has ever had even a vegetable garden. Sooner or later, you uproot the plants or trees that are not bearing fruit. So upon finding a fig tree that is alive and well, yet not bearing fruit, a landowner instructs his gardener to get rid of the tree. The gardener protests, asking for *one more year . . . one more year* in which to tend the tree by loosening the soil and spreading manure around it. But if it does not respond, the gardener agrees, then, yes, cut it down.

It's fairly common to assume that the landowner is God and the gardener Jesus. But nowhere in Luke do we find a picture of an angry God that needs to be placated by a merciful Jesus. Rather, Jesus portrays God as a father who scans the horizon day in and day out waiting for his wayward son to come home, or as a woman who - after sweeping her house all night looking for a lost coin - throws a party costing even more to celebrate that she found it. Given this slightly different picture of God's reaction to sin, I wonder if we wouldn't do better to imagine that God is this peculiar gardener, the one so partial to unyielding fig trees. The God that isn't beneath loosening the soil around us, and even spreading manure in the hope that we may bear fruit. Why? Because God loves us and wants the best for us.

Many of us are guilty of trying to read the signs of the times - are guilty of pontificating on the nature of evil - are guilty of offering explanations for the misfortunes that befall others - *because it takes the attention off of us!* How often do we spend our limited brain power and heart power on debating the concerns of others, when we could be using those limited resources to actually bear fruit in the world where God has placed us.

Apparently a case *could* be made for cutting the tree down. Apparently a case *could* be made for each us perishing – just as those who had the tower fall on them. Jesus does not remove the eventuality of judgment, but Jesus has intervened on our behalf to give us more time. But the good news is that Jesus wants us – wants you – to bear fruit.

So for the rest of this Lent, could we take a break from passing judgment on the world? Instead, could we use that time to look within. Jesus looks at our souls, and says that he wants time to, **“dig around it and put manure on it”** with the hopes that we will blossom and bear fruit. Even so, the Beloved intercedes knowing there is no guarantee. The Beloved does not force this growth upon us. We don’t know how the story ends.

So as we receive the Lord’s Supper today, know that this is part of God’s plan to break up the hard soil of your life, and apply fertilizer. A loving God has secured more time for us . . . but none of us know how much time we have left.

May we then receive the time given us as the gift of love that it is . . . and time for us to bear fruit. Do not to be daunted by the headlines, but rather *focused by them* as a chance to bear fruit now.

Amen.

Luke 13:1 – 9 Repent or Perish

13 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ‘He asked them, **“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.”**

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

‘Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ‘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?’ ‘He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ‘If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

