

When someone asks you - "Why did this bad thing happen to me?" (Why did this cancer happen to me? Or Why did this death of my loved one happen? Or why did that hurricane happen? Or any of the uncountable tragedies that happen every day around the world, "Why do these things happen?")

When you're asked that what is your best answer? The Bible tells us that as people of faith we are to "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." So what is your defense?

1. Everything happens for a reason, even if we can't see the reason.
2. What looks like tragedy is actually for the good.
3. It is not our place to question.
4. Suffering is purely random and it really has no meaning.
5. God is not involved in the minor details of life.
6. None of the above

The number one reason I hear from people that they don't come to church or they don't have faith or they don't even believe in God is this problem of suffering. The church word for it is: Theodicy – why do bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. Let's hear the first part of today's reading:

READ LUKE 13: 1-5

Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices.² He replied, "Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans?³ No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.⁴ What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem?⁵ No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did."

Something tragic had happened. Pontius Pilate, the same Roman Governor who would condemn Jesus to die, murdered a group of Galilean Jews as they offered sacrifices in the temple. And that disturbed the people who followed Jesus. If that kind of violence could happen to the Galilean Jews, maybe it could happen to them.

They were trying to make sense of it, and their rationalization seems to be: those Galilean Jews must have been really bad sinners and so God allowed Pilate to kill them. But, as long as we "behave"; as long as we don't do anything wrong, God won't let that kind of tragedy happen to us. That would make the world feel like a safer place.

Have you ever thought that way? Lots people do, especially religious people. Lots of Christians said that Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans because it was a sinful city. Some Christians said that the earthquake in Haiti was God's punishment for their evil ways. Remember all the Christian leaders who were certain that AIDS was God's revenge on the gay community?

Each of those tragedies was huge and terrifying. And people felt the need to explain them; to try to make sense of what happened, to give them meaning.

Maybe it makes us feel safer to find explanations. Maybe we think, if we stop being bad then a hurricane won't strike us. If we don't live among evil people maybe we can avoid an earthquake. And as long as **I'm** not gay, AIDS is someone else's problem.

Are there tragedies or hardships **you** assume you can avoid because you go to church, or pray, or read the bible? That's the same kind of thinking that we hear in today's reading.

But Jesus will have none of it. Those Galilean Jews who were murdered? They were no better or worse than anyone else. Jesus even refers to another tragedy. Apparently, a tower in the town of Siloam fell and killed 18 people. Did that happen because they were worse sinners than anyone else? Jesus says, "NO". Jesus reminds the crowd that we're **all** sinners. None better or worse than anyone else. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

So, what reason does Jesus give for tragedy? He doesn't. It seems like, if there was a reason, Jesus would **name** it. But, he doesn't probably because there is **no** reason. In a world in which we're given freedom, tragedy happens. In a broken world, bad things happen. Even to good people. Even to people created beautifully in the image of God. Even to people like you and me.

There's a story about a group of people in seminary having a discussion with a professor. The professor would throw out a question that might be on their upcoming exams and then the students would discuss how they might answer it. Then the professor offered this scenario:

A seven-year old girl is a member of your congregation. Her mother has recently and very suddenly died. She approaches you during Sunday morning coffee hour and asks, "Why did my mommy die?" How would you respond?

The story goes that the seminarians jumped into a lively conversation about the problem of evil, the sovereignty of God, the wages of sin...and then talked a lot about how to explain all of that to a seven-year old.

But the professor noticed that one woman remained silent during the conversation. It was woman who, the professor knew, had lost her own mother suddenly when she was young. After the discussion had gone on for a while the professor said to that student, "You've been very quiet. How would you answer that little girl's question? The woman responded, "I would wrap her up in my arms and say, "You really miss your mom, don't you?"

The last portion of our reading today we hear Jesus lament,^{“³⁴} “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn’t want that.^{³⁵} Look, your house is abandoned. I tell you, you won’t see me until the time comes when you say, *Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord’s name.*”

Suffering and tragedy can happen to *anyone*. The seminarian got it right. There are no “whys” to tragedy and heartache of life. There are no simple answers. We can’t control everything. We can’t protect ourselves from every eventuality. Bad things happen to sinners and saints like you and me. Drunk drivers kill people. Cancer cells metastasize. Hurricanes and tornadoes destroy. Innocent people suffer in senseless violence. Of course, we’re afraid. Of course, we try to make sense of it all.

But God simply says, “Do not be afraid. I’m here. I am loving and patient. Tragedy is not my punishment. Love is my only motivation, and reconciliation and resurrection are the endings to every story I write...and I write them all.”

But, there’s still more to the scripture story for today.

READ vs. 6-9

⁶ Jesus told this parable: “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none.⁷ He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’⁸ The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer.⁹ Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’”

Maybe one reason we all try to explain why other people suffer is because deep down we know we’re sinners. We know that we, like the fig tree in Jesus’ parable, have failed to bear fruit. We were created to bear fruit, the fruit of God’s love and peace and justice in the world. But we fail time and time again. We want to believe that if we can only quit sinning, if we can only be those imagined ‘good’ people that exist **somewhere**, if we’re only more like them, we’ll avoid tragedy and so we, in a sense, blame victims for their own misery.

Jesus sees that sad attempt at self-justification and simply tells us the truth about ourselves and about God. The truth that, despite our failures, God loves us with **endless** patience. The main point of the parable is not that the fig tree gets chopped down but that **despite** what we **do** or fail to do, despite the lack of fruit borne in our lives, God waits. God gives us **more** time to turn, to bear fruit, to do justice, to love kindness and generosity and hospitality and peace. That’s the truth about God.

God gives us time. Time to let go of our fear. Time to let go of our self-centered focus. Time to stop worrying about how we might die and instead focus on how we're going to live, how we'll bear fruit! As Mary Oliver says in her poem, "What we're going to do with our one wild, and precious life!"

We have time, and we have God's promise that God is at work nurturing us, "fertilizing" us to be people who bear the fruit of love, generosity, justice and peace in the world.

We have time. But, we don't have **endless** time. Every life ends. So let's think for a minute. What one thing can you commit to doing to bear the fruit of love, generosity, justice and peace in your corner of the world? It doesn't have to be something big in order to have big impact. In fact, it's the little things done with love that seem to make the greatest difference. So, what **one** thing can you commit to doing to bear fruit this week? Needs some ideas? Write a note to encourage someone who's struggling. Take a meal to someone who is ill. Spend some time with someone who is lonely. Give an extra gift to one of the charities you already support.

And because this is hard and this fruit bearing work needs all the fertilizer it can get, because turning away from sin to bear fruit is a new challenge every day, how about spending 10 minutes reading the Bible, or 10 minutes in prayer. Or commit to a new practice using the guide that's in your bulletin every week or commit to asking someone at coffee each week, "How's your walk with God going?" or "What have you seen God doing lately?" Take a few minutes to write your commitment on the card you have. When you come forward for the Lord's Supper you can put that card in the basket here by the cross.