

“ANOTHER CHANCE!”
Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9
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Sunday, January 10, was a great day in the life of this congregation. That afternoon thirty pieces of music were performed by some of the individuals and choral ensembles of this church. Not only did the Mini-Music Marathon remind us that Church of the Saviour’s “got talent,” it also helped raise needed funds for a new roof for the Methodist school in the town of DonDon, Haiti. We could hardly believe our ears when news began coming, only two days later, that a devastating earthquake had hit that country, all but destroying the capital city of Port au Prince. We already knew that Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. We already knew that the forests have been cut down, that the government is unstable and ineffective, and that the infrastructure is woefully lacking. Now, add to that the devastation of one of the worst earthquakes in history. It is estimated that over 230,000 people lost their lives, another 300,000 were injured, and that one million people were left homeless. While people around the globe have been generous in their outpouring of aid, it will take years for this already struggling country to recover from this disaster.

We had not regained equilibrium as a world community from the devastation in Haiti, when we received news this past week of another earthquake, this time in Chile. While not of the magnitude of the earlier quake in Haiti, still the loss of life and the damage to property is extensive. Another disaster.

In these circumstances, it is only human nature to ask, “Why?” Why did this happen? If God is in control of the universe, what is God thinking? Why is God letting things like this happen?” We look for reasons and for answers. There are those among us who are always willing to suggest that such catastrophes are God’s judgment and God’s punishment for sin. When something bad happens in your life or in mine, it is human nature to say, “What did I do to deserve this?” When disaster strikes, we often assume that we are being punished for something we have done, or something we left undone.

In today’s Gospel, folks ask Jesus about recent events that have taken place in their country. The first example they give concerns Pilate --- that would be Pontius Pilate, the brutal ruler who eventually condemned Jesus to death. In today’s story we learn that Pilate had murdered a group of Galileans who were simply worshiping God at the temple in Jerusalem. Were they being punished for their sins? Then the people ask Jesus about another terrible thing that happened. A tower had fallen and killed eighteen people. “Were these people worse sinners than the rest of us?” asked those who came to Jesus.

Two tragedies, you see. No one person or group is singled out. Small town folks as well as city dwellers have been affected. Clearly, these people were simply going about their business when misfortune struck. The people at the temple were victims of random violence.

Pilate, as governor, sent his soldiers to murder these people. The fairly gruesome description of the victims' blood mixing with the blood of the daily sacrifice underscores the brutality of Pilate's action. Innocent people caught in the crossfire. It is an example of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Stories like that can be found in the *Plain Dealer* every day. Whether it is drive-by shootings or hit-and-run accidents, there are many examples of violence touching our daily lives.

The second story is a little different. It is an example of just plain bad luck. Eighteen people were standing by a tower when it collapsed and crushed them to death. If they had been standing by another tower or showed up fifteen minutes later, they would have been fine. But they were at that particular place at that particular moment, and that made all the difference.

Is this God's punishment?

"Not at all," says Jesus. Bad things sometimes happen to good people. When violence enters our lives, it is tragic and traumatic, but it is not necessarily God punishing us. Innocent people sometimes suffer. Our prime example is Jesus Christ himself. The crucifixion is a declaration for all time that scandal and horrific death do not fall only on the sinful. God does not cause illness. God does not cause towers to collapse on people. God does not cause violence. Tragedy is part of the human condition. Sometimes we get caught up in it. In the same way that prosperity and good health are not necessarily signs of God's favor, poverty and suffering are not signs of God's displeasure with a sinful life. You will remember elsewhere in the Gospel story the disciples encounter a blind man and ask Jesus, "Who sinned? Do you think his parents sinned or did he sin in order to be born in this condition?"

"Neither one," replies Jesus, who will not allow himself to be drawn into a discussion about who sinned, or who caused this tragedy. Rather he throws the question back into their laps, "*I tell you, unless you repent, you shall also be under judgment.*"

What Jesus told the disciples is as true today as it was in the first century. You never know when there is going to be an accident. You never know when something terrible might occur. Yet the purpose of reading this story on the third Sunday in Lent is not to scare us, but to cause us to stop and think. Just maybe, we need to repent of our sins and get right with God, so that whether everything goes well this week, or tragedy strikes, we will be living a life that is pleasing to God.

Then, to drive home his point, Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. The fig tree has been in the garden for three years, but has yet to produce one edible fig! There is clearly something wrong. It isn't living up to its potential. The fig tree is disappointing to the farmer. A passerby looks at the tree and observes that it seems useless. Why own a fruit tree that doesn't give any fruit? The tree should be cut down to make room for a more productive tree. Yet the gardener doesn't want to be too hasty. "Let me dig around it and put manure on it," he begs. The gardener is the voice of grace. Although presumably he has already been caring for the tree, he requests "one more year" with the promise that he will carefully nurture it. Surely the tree will flourish! If not, then it must be cut down.

With this parable, Jesus gives us a vision of God, who has expectations for each of us. The God we worship is a God of judgment, who will judge us on our actions and on our lives. But God is also a God of grace and patience. God will give us every opportunity to repent, turn around, and come back to God. God wants this so much that God sent his own son with the message: "Repent. Turn from the actions that are hurting you and your neighbors and separating you from God. Come back to God who wants to take care of you."

God is forgiving. That “one more year” is our chance to grow, live, prosper and not get cut off. God does not mindlessly punish. God doesn’t arbitrarily pick people out of a line-up. God judges with fairness. But Jesus also tells us that the sinful life has real consequences, and that God will hold us accountable for our lives and for our actions.

As a parent, I can testify that one of the greatest challenges of being a parent is the challenge to summon up the energy to discipline your children. I confess that when our sons were growing up, my wife was much better at holding our children accountable than I was. It’s much easier to look the other way when your children misbehave than it is to take the time and the energy to sit down with them and try to explain, in ways that they can understand, why their behavior was inappropriate. My heart really goes out to single parents, and to parents who are forced to work long hours to provide for their children, and then come home and somehow find the energy to hold their children accountable, to dare to discipline their children whom they love, because they love them. Christians believe that God loves us so much that God refuses to leave us alone. God keeps working with us, giving us chance after chance to follow his way and walk with him.

The truth is, nobody enjoys judgment. But it is also true that judgment is part of life. I think of those times when I was in school, when some teacher gave me a grade that was lower than the grade I thought I deserved. How dare that teacher judge my work to be merely average, when I thought it was excellent! But some of the worst grades that I received, some of the toughest assignments a teacher gave me, were those times when a teacher said to me, “I gave you the grade I did because I believe you can do better. I was disappointed that you did not put more into this paper or assignment or project.” Has that every happened to you? I felt about this big, because the truth is, I disappointed not only my teacher. I disappointed myself by doing second-rate work.

How I wish the teacher had simply failed me! That way I could have blamed the teacher and pointed out how unfair that teacher was, and made it the teacher’s fault. I might have even been successful in getting my parents to go to the school and complain about that teacher to the principal. But the truth is, after that teacher’s speech, I had no one to blame but myself. The toughest words of judgment are the words of disappointment, aren’t they? “Charlie, I’m disappointed in you.” That’s what I hear God saying to me this morning. “Charlie, I’m disappointed in you.”

“Repent or perish!” That’s the hard word of judgment from Jesus this morning. We may not have an earthquake hit Cleveland. We may not have a building collapse here. But the people in Haiti and Chile are no worse than we are. The Bible tells us that all of us stand under the judgment of God. All of us have disappointed God. All of us need to repent. You must repent! I must repent! Repent or perish. That’s not debatable. The only question is this: how many more chances will we get?

Yes, today’s Scripture is an unsettling one, for none of us want to be judged. Yet the message of “repent or perish” comes through loud and clear. We have plenty of illustrations of the fact that our lives will not go on forever, and may, indeed, be cut tragically short. But the good news is that **God has not yet cut down the fig tree!** God is giving us another chance to change our ways, to be more productive, to bear fruit. Jesus is reminding us to put our faith in God and to follow where God leads.

The easy way to remember this story about the fig tree is to let each letter stand for what God is calling us to do: put our **faith in God --- F.I.G.** Right now, you have **another chance** to do just that. Put your **faith in God** this very day!

Prayer: Gracious God, we are thankful that your door is always open to us, and that your heart overflows with love. Draw us near to you so that we may confess our misdeeds and receive your forgiveness. Help us to be aware of our sins, which separate us from you. With confidence in your mercy, let us confess our sins so that we may be made whole again. You are indeed the God of new life. Thank you for cleansing us and releasing us to begin again with renewed hope and strength. Thank you for **another chance**, gracious God. Amen.

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