

Introductory

This material is exclusive to Luke. It is not found in the TLH one-year lectionary. It is the appointed reading for Lent 3C in the LW three-year lectionary. In this text we see people presenting Jesus with one of those basic questions of life; things like how we got here, where we're going, what happens when you die and here.

Things like why bad things happen to some people and not to others. This might be a good Sunday for the preacher to address that basic question, perhaps best put by Rabbi Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* back in the 70s. Critics like me pointed out that the title of the book contains at least one and probably two factual errors.

The questioners in today's reading are identified only as "some present." There are times when people, especially the religious leaders, ask Jesus questions to "test" Him, but I don't think that's the case here, but usually it's the religious leaders asking those kinds of questions, and these people are not identified as religious leaders.

They seem to be just people, who are asking the same question that you've been asked a hundred times. Pure Calvinism has an easy answer to this question; these things happened because the Sovereign God willed that they happen. In the extreme, the Calvinist would have things like bank robberies and World Series Champions included.

For the Arminian the answer is maybe not quite so easy and obvious, but it's not hard; we all make choices and are in control of our destinies, and it sucks for those people that they made the wrong choice. They should not have been at that construction site, and of course they were getting their just desserts for participating in a riot.

A spiritual Arminian might say that perhaps if those would have prayed more or better or would have listened to God, they would have realized that they should have avoided those dangerous situations, but in the end, it's your call, and you are responsible for your own health, wealth, and eternal salvation. Well, with a little help from Jesus.

The Lutheran realizes that God interacting with creation is not quite so cut and dried, at least when it comes to the question of what appear to be bad things happening people who think that they are good. To be sure, sometimes there is a direct cause and effect relationship between a bad thing happening and its cause.

The reason why you rolled your car may well be that you were going too fast on that curve, and you may be in jail because you robbed that liquor store. But sometimes not.

Sometimes the cause and effect relationship is muddled, even baffling. The assumption that we can understand everything about God is both common and wrong.

Does the child understand everything about the parent and parenting? Does the student have the abilities and knowledge of the teacher? Does any teen-ager ever understand any parent? Take a look at how God talks to Job when He takes him to task for thinking that he, Job, a man, should be able to understand God.

In this pericope it is especially and fundamentally noteworthy how Jesus responds to that basic question asked by “some present.” He speaks to both the incident at the Temple and brings up the one at the tower in Siloam firstly by asking a brief rhetorical question. In both cases, the rhetorical question is prelude to a call to repentance.

If I had to summarize what is going on here, I would say that “some present” wanted to talk theology with Jesus on one of those questions that, though basic, is somewhat complex and not easily answered in a sentence or two, the one that is at some level unanswerable. They want to share, and they want Jesus to share, sort of like Adult Bible Class.

Jesus essentially tells them that, rather than being interested in things that you are unable to know, maybe you should be concerned with knowable things; your eternal salvation, for example. It’s a problem for modern man especially; the idea that there are things you can’t understand is to him repugnant. If you can’t understand it, then it’s...

The immediate context is that Jesus has been talking about things that appear to be pretty cut and dried; coming judgment (everybody can understand the Law) and signs of the seasons. Some asked Jesus about things not quite so certain, things that are in fact quite uncertain to the point that they seem to be almost random.

There is some pretty good evidence to indicate that both of these tragic events are based on real incidents. William Barclay’s Commentary goes into some detail about them. Barclay is often theologically quite liberal but has a good grasp on historical context. Choose a similar, more familiar, example of such a tragic incident in this week’s news.

Textual Notes

1. Jesus runs into un-named people who are “ἀπαγγέλλοντες αὐτῷ περὶ τῶν Γαλιλαίων ὧν τὸ αἷμα Πειλᾶτος ἔμιξεν μετὰ τῶν θυσιῶν αὐτῷ - reporting to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices.” It’s a participle, and it’s the word used when one is reporting what we would call a news item, or proclaiming the Gospel.

This incident happened “ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ καιρῷ – in that time,” which WP correctly takes to mean that it occurred “apparently in close connexion with the preceding discourses.” Based

on those preceding discourses, about the coming judgment, the people asking the question may be making the case that those dead people were only getting what they deserved.

The incident here referenced by these people to Jesus, says Barclay, is to an act of civil disobedience by some Galileans who had travelled to Jerusalem for Temple. The issue being protested was the expenditure of funds that had been collected to support the running of the Temple funds on a water project, which the Galileans opposed.

Being from Galilee, not benefiting from a water project in Jerusalem, it is not surprising that they opposed it. Pilate, Barclay says, instructed his men, who were disguised in street clothes, to “mingle” with the crowd, and one thing led to another and lives were lost. The question is about the seeming randomness of it all, a common query of man.

Think of the Kent State University shootings in 1970. On May 4 National Guardsmen “fired 67 rounds over a period of 13 seconds, killing four students and wounding nine others (WIK).” Why did those bullets strike those students and not others? You could ask the same question every time there is a protest and people get killed.

You can say that the individual guardsmen aimed at individual people, but given those circumstances, you are probably just aiming in the general direction. If you’ve ever shot a gun, then you know that you don’t always hit what you’re aiming at, and in a situation like that, tension, people moving around, the trajectory of bullets is anything but predictable.

The answer of Jesus seems to indicate that the people asking the question may well be making the case that the people who died at the hand of Pilate were getting what they had coming to them. Perhaps the Roman Governor was in some way administering God’s judgment on those people for their rank sinfulness, a theologically interesting idea.

The claim that blood was on the Roman Gentile Pilate’s hands makes it a political issue, and to make the case the he was the one administering God’s justice would not have been a popular endeavor. As a matter of fact, God uses Gentiles all the time in the OT to administer His justice, and He makes no secret of it, very openly saying the same.

2. Jesus “ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς – answering said to them,” what He said to them. The verb is “ἀποκρίνομαι,” and it means that the speaker is responding to what has just been said or asked. As is the wont of people, when they are relating to Jesus the incident where people lost their lives, they are doing more than just telling Him the story.

Indeed, implicit in the telling is the old *cur alli non alli*; why some, not others? Like certain of Job’s counselors, they think they know the answer. His answer is to speak to a common belief that if something bad, like getting killed, whether at Kent State or in Jerusalem, happens to a person, it must be because that person is a worse “sinner” than the rest,

That was easy, wasn't it? It makes sense, doesn't it? Easily understood even by a child, and it also sounds like a very just way to do things. We note that this apparent assertion is made by people who happen to be living. The only problem is that all too often just the opposite happens; the good person is the one who suffers and the evil one is spared.

His response is to ask whether “οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι οὗτοι ἁμαρτωλοὶ παρὰ πάντας τοὺς Γαλιλαίους ἐγένοντο – these Galileans sinners (were) beyond other Galilean sinners,” which seems to us to be a rhetorical question, to be rhetorically answered in the negative, but you are a Lutheran, so not so fast.

The hearer in that time and place may well have rhetorically answered “yes, of course those who were the worse sinners were killed. That's why they were killed, and others were not.” Again, a very simple way to explain life and death, and easily understood. But Jesus seems to think that it's not quite that simple.

3. Rabbi Kushner's book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is still out there, and we get implicit and explicit questions like that all the time, and it's one of those basic questions of life. Even if not vocalized, it is thought every time there is a shooting, a natural disaster, cancer, or somebody is killed in a construction accident.

The most important take-away here is how Jesus responds to that question first by telling them that they're wrong to think like that, “οὐχὶ λέγω ὑμῖν – no, I say to you” and then by directing the askers to a different theological issue, “ἀλλ' ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήτε, πάντες ὁμοίως ἀπολεισθήσθε – but except you repent, all you will likewise perish.”

The verb “repent – μετανοέω” is in the subjunctive mood, which indicates uncertainty; they will repent, or they will not repent. The word means “change,” and it's often (always?) an apocalyptic word connected with the final judgment. What's going on here is something that goes on every day in the classroom and other pedagogical contexts.

The pastor is talking about something that makes people uncomfortable, and they want him to stop, so they ask him a question that they know will make him stop talking about that thing and start talking about another thing, one not easily or quickly explained. Jesus is talking about repentance. They want to discuss how many angels can dance on a pin head.

By telling His crowd to “repent,” Jesus is refusing to allow His classroom to be taken over by those who are trying to change the subject. His response to that attempt is to bring the discussion right back to where He wants it to be, and to use their words as a point of reference; you need to repent, or “πάντες ὁμοίως – you all also” are going to die.

The truth of the matter, of course, and implicit in His statement, is that we are all going to die. Some will die sooner than others, but this thing is ultimately terminal for us all. But

when He points out that you need to repent or you're going to die, He means that – speaking of people dying unexpectedly and seemingly at random – you could be next.

4. To put it another way, it could just as easily have been you, if you were at that protest. Sensing a teachable moment, latching on to their train of thought, Jesus then brings up a similar, but different incident, a tower collapse in Siloam that killed eighteen people. The common thread in these two incidents is that people are killed in a seemingly random way.

And unexpected. But mostly random. The difference is that the randomness seems to of a somewhat different kind in each of the two incidents. While there is a certain randomness when people kill certain individuals in a crowd, the death of a person at the collapse of a tower, like the one at Siloam, would seem to be even more random.

Siloam is located on the southern end of Ancient Jerusalem, and the tower spoken of here no longer exists. Although the text does not say that it was, extratextual evidence suggests that the reference here is to a construction accident involving aqueducts. If you google “Jerusalem Aqueducts,” there’s a lot there. But we digress.

We note that when Jesus talks about the falling tower, He seems to be speaking about an incident familiar to all, like 911 or flooding in Nebraska. If the randomness at the protest comes in the mind and at the hand of a soldier, here the Laws of Physics dictate where a falling tower will land, and who are killed seems to be a matter of pure chance.

At this point, we note that the word translated “tower” is “πύργος,” and that Roman aqueducts consist of a series of towers topped by a trough or tube for carrying water. It may well be that these are the towers being referred to here by Jesus. But WIK says that the Jerusalem aqueducts were all underground. But we digress.

Barclay sees a possible connection between the two incidents; that the incident described here could refer to Jews who were working on an aqueduct being built by Pilate, a project that was being paid for with Temple funds, the cause for the civil action that had resulted in the blood of Galileans being mingled with Temple sacrifices.

It has been suggested that they had actually taken work on Pilate’s hated aqueducts. If so, any money they earned was due to God and should have been voluntarily handed over, because it had already been stolen from him; and it may well be that popular talk had declared that the tower had fallen on them because of the work they had consented to do.

Barclay is not making this all up. In its article “Pontius Pilate,” WIK says that Josephus writes about both the aqueduct and the mob activity, and this web page has the references and quotes from Josephus: <http://www.livius.org/pi-pm/pilate/pilate05.html>

The idea that God killed certain people with a tower is not really that far-fetched, and in fact the OT contains accounts of just that sort of thing happening. But Jesus specifically says that in this case that was not the case, so it was not a matter of deliberate killing by God by means of tower.

5. Again, Jesus changes the subject from the rather general theological question of “why” to the rather personal subject of a person’s repentance and death, emphatic but “ἀλλ’ ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσητε πάντες ὡσαύτως ἀπολεῖσθε – if you should not repent, you all will likewise die.” Just exactly what does He mean when He says that – twice?

Of course, whether or not they repent, they are going to die. The “just as they did” point of comparison lies rather in the suddenness, and more to the point, the unexpectedness of death, and even most to the point the randomness, and being prepared for that death. And how does one so prepare? By repentance, a fine Lenten theme if ever there was.

6. Bringing the people back now to the place from which they had departed a few verses previous, speaking apocalyptically about the coming judgment. He moves into the parable of the fig tree, which teaches that yes, there is still time, but not much. That’s good apocalyptic preaching, and could be big picture about Israel, but it’s not.

This parable is about the individual. When preaching about this parable, you should note that Jesus is talking about a fig tree. A fig tree bears figs, or not, sort of like an apple tree bears apples, or not. Your people don’t have fig trees, or maybe even know what one looks like, but they do know apples and apple trees, and some may well have some.

By deliberately using objects and concept that are more familiar to our hearers, like Jesus does, we deliberately make our preaching more understandable and easier to listen to, and you know how it is when you are listening to a speaker; if they are easy to listen to, you are going to be more likely to listen for a longer period of time, and more closely.

We can better make the parable’s point by using an apple or other familiar tree than by using a tree that most people have never seen, and whose acquaintance with its fruit is from eating a Fig Newton, and when’s the last time you had one of those things? If you do that, perhaps the hearer will think of this the next time he sees and apple tree or eats and apple.

7 - 8. The thing about an orchard; it’s a highly competitive field, and not all trees make it, and it’s part and parcel of having an orchard or a field to do this for this reason; “ἔκκοπον αὐτήν· ἵνα τί καὶ τὴν γῆν καταργεῖ – cut it down. Why should it use up the earth?” There’s only so much in the ground, and the roots of every tree is competing for it.

It’s the same concept as pruning, only on a larger scale. We got a cherry tree several years ago, and it never produced. Don’t know why. I dug around it, just like Jesus said, threw

manure, for a few years, then I cut it down. It wasn't producing, but more to the point it was taking valuable water, minerals and nutrients from the apple-producing tree next to it.

The meaning of the parable is clear. Jesus, who has been preaching about judgment and about being prepared for that judgment by being repentant, uses the tree to show the end of the repentant person as opposed to the one who is not repentant. The Fathers almost without fail and correctly take the tree to mean unrepentant Israel.

I'm not necessarily disagreeing with them, and it's more of a both/and, than an either/or. As far as application today, the parable – and Israel (OT and NT) – is a cautionary tale for the Christian individual, for the congregation, for the church body, for entire countries. There's still time, but time is running out, and before you know it, there will be no time.

9. The parable further talks about giving the unfruitful tree one last chance, but if no fruit appears, then there is only one thing left to do; cut it down. You may have to explain that concept to youngsters and some city dwellers. If you don't, young urbanites will not likely know what you're talking about when you talk about cutting down non-producing trees.

Add to that the understanding that many of them have that any cutting down of any tree is bad, and they may see a Jesus who is not only environmentally irresponsible, but wicked for talking about cutting a tree down just because it's not bearing fruit. Most of these same people live in houses built largely of lumber, which comes from wood from trees.

Law/Gospel

Chaos and Disorder/Control and Order - To the world, and often to the Christian, it looks like God's creation has spiraled out of control and into chaos. Things seem to happen in a random way. There is a plethora of anecdotes from 9-11 about people who just happened to be in the WTC and people who called in sick that day - just barely. Things like that happen every day to everybody. People need to be assured that God is indeed in control, and that even though we do not understand everything, He does, and He has it covered.

The last word in the ear of the listener on Sunday morning is "peace," from the Hebrew "shalom," a final assurance of just that before she leaves the sanctuary of Divine Service to enter into the world. (Some churches mess this up by putting up a sign that says "You are now entering the mission field," thereby leaving people with the Law ringing in their minds, not the Gospel.) In the book of Revelation, John seeks to assure the Christians that God is aware and in control of the situation. If you can work in Dr. Ian Malcolm and his "Chaos Theory" from the movie *Jurassic Park*, that might be fun.

Non-Repentant/Repentant - Lent is a season of penitence, an appropriate time to talk about the Law/Gospel of Repentance. The Law brings about contrition, so that the Gospel can do its work. The person who is not repentant does not think he needs the Gospel. This may be a good place to talk about Confession and Absolution and Church Discipline. I often mention that Confession should really be a more private matter or something like that. So far, no takers.

Uncertainty/Certainty - Similar to Chaos/Order, the world where things like death and injury seem to be so random is a world that is uncertain. You never know when it's going to happen to you. It could be today, or tomorrow... The non-Christian has no way to deal with this, except perhaps to escape to a happy place through denial, drugs or alcohol, et al. The Christian knows that the worst possible case scenario is that he ends up in heaven for eternity. Reference Baptism as the place where this certainty can be found, like Luther did. "I have been Baptized," he said to Satan. The certainty of the presence of Jesus in the Sacrament might also be comforting.

Ignorance/Knowledge - Contrary to popular belief, Christians are not against knowledge. We are generally against ignorance. Most non-Christians would say the same thing; ignorance is a bad thing and knowledge is a good thing. The World does not have a clue as to why tragedy occurs. The same can be said of the Christian. What the Christian *does* know is that ultimately God is in control. This knowledge makes the unknown palatable, much like the seemingly odd actions of the parent are palatable because the child trusts that the parent knows what he is doing. The knowledge that is most important is that the true God is a loving God, a thought that does not even occur to the pagan. Why would it? God's love is most clearly revealed on the cross.

Abandonment/Nurturing - Because of our lack of repentance, it would be understandable that God abandon us to the fires of hell, and other things. Not only does He not do that, He comes seeking us (like the lost sheep), and nurtures us, like the fig tree is nurtured.

Hymns

Lenten hymns are always appropriate during Lent. For many churches, it's the only time of the year that they sing them. Remember the rule: only one hard-to-sing but doctrinally correct with-great-words hymn per week.

LSB 758 – The Will of God is Always Best

LSB 765 – God Moves in a Mysterious Way

LSB 760 – What God Ordains is Always Good

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

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