

# Questions for Jesus: Who's to Blame?

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## Luke 13: 1-9

What is going on here in this text? I once heard it said that there are times when the words of Jesus are the most unwelcome words you can get. He can say things that make you want to close your Bible and get on with your business. That might be the case with today's text. There has been an unspeakable atrocity committed by the Romans, coupled with a horrible accident. Innocent people have died. People come to Jesus with big questions. They want to know why such things have happened. "Were these people somehow guiltier than others in the sight of God? Were they being punished somehow? But all Jesus says in response is, "Unless you repent, you will all perish." "What? What do you mean by that? Hey, we are the victims here. What did we do? We didn't do anything. What do you mean repent? Repent of what?" Not exactly Jesus' most pastoral moment.

I am called to the hospital. I am met by anguished parents outside the ICU. Their child is desperately ill. In that moment, things don't look good. And they want to know, "Why is this happening to our child? We try to live good and moral lives. We go to church, care for our family and our neighbor. Why is God letting this happen to our child?" And in response to their anguish, I respond, "I don't know, but unless you repent, you will certainly perish." Something tells me that might be my last hospital call as the pastor of this church. But getting back to our text, in this moment, with all these haunting questions swirling around him, why do you suppose Jesus says what he says?

First of all, it is clear that Jesus will not be manipulated by anyone's agenda. Pontius Pilate, whose rule over Israel was brutal, has ordered the massacre of innocent Jews. People are angry, outraged. Who wouldn't be? And so they turn to Jesus. What do you suppose they want from him? How about some sympathy or better yet, a denunciation of Pilate and the Romans. They want their cause to be his cause, their grief his grief, their righteous anger his righteous anger. They want to hear that they are on the right track, that they are basically good people fighting for a just cause. Who wouldn't like to hear that?

But I suspect that never in a million years did they expect to hear, "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." How much courage did it take to stand there in the midst of these outraged people, people feeling oppressed and abused, and say what he said? More than I have. Perhaps we have an insight here as to why his own community ultimately rejected him. They want him to condemn the evil in Pilate and the Romans. He replies that perhaps they had first take an honest look at the evil in their own hearts. Be careful when you ask Jesus a question. You seldom get what you expect, and you might very well hear what you don't want to hear. You think Pilate is evil? What are you carrying around inside of you?

I have shared with you before some comments from a sermon that was delivered the Sunday after September 11, 2001. In his sermon, the preacher said this: "As Christians, we are commanded, not only to see in the events of world history the hand of God and to see the comfort of God, but also to expect the possibility of the judgment of God." He went on to speculate on the ways that this event was not only a horrible tragedy and a great injustice, but it was also judgment upon us as a people – judgment upon United States' foreign policy, judgment upon our insensitivity to the needs of others, judgment upon our national arrogance. Within a couple of months of that sermon, he was asked to find another church.

I know that on that Sunday following 9/11, when churches across America were filled to overflowing – for one week – I did not preach a sermon like that. That pastor was calling for repentance, for an honest look into our own hearts. This was something, at that time, we had no interest in doing. We were the victims, not the perpetrators! Who knows, perhaps a little honest self-examination following 9/11 might have prevented our rush into a bloody, expensive and ultimately, rather futile war which haunts us, and our economy, to this day.

Jesus is not ignoring the evil of Pilate and Rome. He is not glossing over the suffering of his people. But he is being brutally honest with them, again is daring to speak a word no one wants to hear. How tempting it is always to believe that we are the angels and they are the devils. Certainly that would define what passes as governance in Washington these days. And how easy it is to believe that we are our own judge, that we

are not accountable to any standard higher than our own conscience, our own values, our own ideology.

But Jesus doesn't buy into that reasoning. He insists that there might very well be devils among us and angels among them. He insists that as long as we focus only on the evil of Pilate, on how bad it is out there, we might very well be destroyed by the evil that resides in here. Says New Testament scholar, Kenneth Bailey, "Jesus does not tell them to submit to Pilate. He is not acquiescing to Roman oppression. Rather he bravely demonstrates a deep concern for the people in front of him who will destroy themselves and all around them if they do not repent."

Repent...it is word that shows up in Lent, this season of introspection and honest self-examination for Christians. And it is a word that shows up a lot in Jesus' teaching and preaching. Repent – a word that carries a lot of negative baggage...words such as guilt and shame come to mind. But, in fact, repent actually means to turn around, to change one's mind, to turn away from all that is against God and to unconditionally turn toward God. It involves a radical transformation of our relationship both with God and with neighbor, a starting over, a new direction, a reorientation of our life in the world. Jesus says to the angry crowd and to us, "Are you prepared to turn, change the direction of your life and walk with me? Will you go the way I am going?" And, amazingly, he seems to think that we can.

But can we? So often I feel like my prayers for personal change, new directions, for being more the person God created me to be seem pretty hopeless. Can't teach an old dog new tricks, can't fight genetics, once a Norwegian, always a Norwegian. We've heard it all – life is basically replaying tapes that were implanted in our brains when we were born. Once your gender or ethnic background or socioeconomic level has been determined, what can anybody do? And I know that, year after year, as I struggle with the same anxieties and fears, the same dark valleys of grief and emptiness, the same weakness and lack of direction, the same old compulsions, the same imperfections...I'm just not sure that transformation, change, new directions are possible for me. I can't do this!

But again, Jesus just doesn't buy it. In the words of one colleague, "Don't you see, even at the end, even as he moves toward his certain death, Jesus still calls on people to change. One might have thought that after all the teaching, all the prodding, that it would be too late. But it is not too late. There is still time. Jesus may have more faith in you than you have in yourself. Yes, old habits die hard. I know that. But I also know that, in Jesus, there is power unleashed in life. There is power greater than that of our own devising. When God created us, Genesis says that God's image was stamped upon us. Admittedly, we have defaced that image terribly. Yet God still intends to have God's way with us. By God's grace we can change, can still hope." Who knew? Maybe it isn't all up to me. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved, changed, transformed a wretch like me...a wandering soul like me, sometimes a lost soul, like me." Who would have thought that God would care that much, that God would hang in there with me. Yes, Amazing Grace!

There was a man who planted a fig tree. It had grown long enough to begin bearing good fruit. But when he went out with his gardener, there was no fruit to harvest. So the owner of the tree said, "I've been looking for fruit for three years from this tree and still no fruit. It is never going to produce anything. It isn't worth the effort. Cut it down!" And the gardener said, "Please, let me care for it just a little longer. I'll dig around it, add some fertilizer, give it special attention. Let's give it a little more time, give it another chance, it can still bear good fruit." And the owner said, "OK." In other words, the grace, the patience, the abiding love of God are still with us. God is saying, "I'll wait on them, those good people of The Community Church of Sebastopol. I'll wait...I still have hope for them. There still is time for transformation and new beginnings for each and every one of them. I'll give them some time." I am continually amazed at the grace and patience and hope of God.