

March 20, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Jesus urges you to repent!

He shows you the need to repent

He gives you the time to repent

As Jesus moved toward Jerusalem where he would suffer and die, some people asked him about a recent tragedy. There were some Jews from the northern region of Galilee who went to the temple to worship and offer a sacrifice to God. Were they perhaps plotting a revolution against the Romans? They did something that made the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, angry and he ordered their execution. The Roman soldiers killed those Galileans while they were worshiping, thus mixing their blood together with their sacrifices. Such a death in the midst of a sacred act made people wonder if God was punishing them because they were guilty of some really bad sin. Jesus simply explained, “No.” Just because something tragic happens to someone doesn’t necessarily mean that God is punishing him.

Jesus pointed to another example. A tower at the watering hole of Siloam in Jerusalem fell down and killed 18 people. It was one of those freak accidents that no one predicted and no one caused. I suppose the insurance companies today would call it an “Act of God.” Many thought that God must have been punishing those 18 people because they were especially sinful. Not so, Jesus explained. Again, just because something tragic happens to someone doesn’t necessarily mean that God is punishing him.

Consider the civilians in Ukraine who were killed while seeking shelter in a theater last week. They did nothing wrong. They just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or, think of innocent by-standers, even children, who are killed by a stray bullet in a drive-by shooting. Why? They did not do anything wrong. There are tragedies all around us that do not make sense. Why do loving couples suffer a miscarriage? Why does a healthy teenage boy suffer a stroke and die? Why does a middle-aged mother die in a car accident? Each of you can think of sad things that have happened to you and you wondered why it happened. In our first lesson, the Israelites serving as slaves in Egypt cried out to God, “Why are we suffering like this? What did we do wrong? It doesn’t make sense. Where are you God? God, are you there? God, do you care?”

Human logic suggests that if something bad happens to you it’s because you did something bad. And if something good happens to you it’s because God is rewarding you for something good that you did. A lot of people talk about karma. There is no such thing as karma. Garbage! It is not karma when someone wastes his money and ends up poor. That’s just foolishness on display. Karma is the talk of the devil! The devil likes to poke his gnarly finger into our brains and mix up our thinking. If some sad thing unexpectedly happens to you, the devil wants you to think that God is punishing you. That’s madness! You’ll end up being terrified of God. And if something

good happens to you unexpectedly, the devil suggests that you earned it because you are so good, or at least better than others. That’s madness, too, as we end up trusting in ourselves for our blessings. The when something bad happens to us – as it surely will – we would despair. And when we see something bad happen to others, the devil suggests that they had it coming to them and you are not suffering like them because you are better than they are. No! God does not rule the world through karma.

Do not listen to the devil when he suggests that God is punishing you for doing something wrong. That’s what the cross of Christ is all about. Jesus was lifted up on that cross so God could put him in his cross hairs and fire away at him. While Jesus was on that cross God took all of his righteous anger over all of our sins and vented his anger on Jesus who was blamed for the sins of the whole world including each and every one of your sins and mine. All of our sins were washed away in the blood of the Lamb of God. Your sins are gone. You are completely forgiven. There are no sins left to be punished. God loves you and only deals with you in love.

Well then, if God loves us and if he already punished Jesus for our sins, why do bad things happen to us? Here in Luke 13, Jesus tells us that it’s not for us to figure out. God is God and he does not owe us an explanation. Even if God did explain to us why certain things happen the way they do, our simplistic, sinful and selfish minds would not understand or agree with God’s explanation. Even though we can not understand why each hardship happens, we can still learn something from each hardship. After talking about the Galileans killed by Pilate and the tower that fell and killed 18 people, Jesus said each time (:3,5), “**But unless you repent, you too will all perish.**” In a sin-infected world such as ours, tragedies will occur. The worst tragedy, however, would be to die without faith in Jesus as your Savior. Jesus paid for the sins of the world, but if people reject Jesus, then they have to pay for their sins themselves. That will leave them separated from God and his blessings forever. That would be the real tragedy of all – for someone to suffer in hell when Jesus already paid for them to go to heaven.

God uses tragedies in our world to show us the need to repent. Each tragedy in this world is another reminder that your life could come to an end at any moment and you always need to be prepared to stand before your Maker. Tragedies do not come upon some people because they are more sinful than others. We are all sinful and we all need to repent. Just like there are mixed up ideas about so-called karma, there are mixed up ideas about repentance, too. I have heard so many false prophets say evil things like, “God will forgive you IF you repent. All you have to do is repent.” They turn repentance into something we do in order to earn our forgiveness! Horrible!

Repenting means nothing more than believing in Jesus as your Savior. Repentance breaks down what happens inside the heart of a believer. As believers we rejoice to know that Jesus already saved us. As believers, we want to turn away from sin that would separate us from God here and eternally. When Jesus tells you to repent, he is simply urging you to take note of the sinful habits and attitudes that keep sprouting in your heart like weeds in a garden and to hang on to him as your Savior from sin.

Each day pause and check your spiritual pulse. Is it pumping strong with love from God and love for others – your family, your friends, even your enemies? Evaluate your spirituality every day. Maybe ask yourself, “Am I doing something that I criticize in others? Am I starting to think that I’m better than others because I came to church this morning? Am I thinking that tragedies happened to others because they are more sinful than I am?” Repentance is not something that we “do” as if we were earning our way into heaven. Repentance is faith. It’s a way of life. We are constantly aware of the fact that we are sinners and we are constantly relieved to know that Jesus saved us. In love, Jesus shows us the need to repent.

A teacher gave her students a special project to do over spring break. They had to read a long book and write a report about the book. The report was due on the day they came back from spring break. As you can guess, some students procrastinated. It was the night before going back to school and they were still reading the book. They did not have their project done when they went back to school after spring break. Surprisingly, the teacher announced that she moved to due date to next week. There was a huge sigh of relief from those students who weren’t done with their project. That was grace – expected, unasked, unearned extra time. Jesus, also, gives us grace. In love, Jesus gives us time to repent.

Jesus told a parable about a man who planted a fig tree. After it matured the owner started looking for fruit, and kept looking. For three years he patiently and eagerly looked for fruit. Finally, he said to his servant (:7), “**Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?**” The servant requested (:8) “**Leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.**” The owner had a right to expect fruit on that fig tree. When it did not produce any fruit, he had a right to cut it down. The servant, however, showed uncommon concern for the tree. We was not ready to give up on it. He wanted to give it another chance and was willing to work extra hard to help it. But if it still did not produce fruit, then there was no use trying any more.

In the same way God has a right to expect fruit of faith from us. He pours out blessing upon blessing on us. He gives us his Word and Sacraments. He washed away every sin. He gives us food and clothing, house and home, family and children. Our lives should be a constant “Alleluia.” But God does not always see the fruit that he has a right to expect from us. It is so easy to complain, to worry, to give into temptation. It is so easy for us to start thinking that our sins are not as evil as the sins of others. It is so easy to overlook the sin lurking in our own hearts. God has every right to cut us down and burn us up eternally. Like the patient gardener, though, God in his mercy is very patient. Still, there will come a time when his patience will finally come to an end. The ax of judgement will eventually fall on those who reject Jesus. It is so easy to shrug off our sins as no big deal. And if our sins are not a big deal to us, then Jesus is not so important to us either. Pretty soon we are honoring Jesus with our lips, but our hearts are far from him. In our second lesson this morning, St. Paul warned us (1 Cor 10:12), “**Be careful that you don’t fall.**”

The people asked Jesus about those who were killed in Jerusalem while offering their sacrifices. And Jesus referenced 18 people who died when a tower fell on them. If that tower stayed standing, someone could have stood at the top of it and looked over the city wall to see more than just a sacrifice at the temple, but to see THE SACRIFICE of Jesus. Jesus became fully human with flesh and blood, just like us, so that he could shed that blood and give you life. I am sure that each of us can think of a time when it would not have been a good time for us to stand before our Maker. There have been times when we have not been walking so closely with Jesus. But Jesus shows us uncommon concern. As St. Peter said (2 Pe 3:9), “[**The Lord**] is **patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**” Jesus not only shows us the need to repent, he also gives us the time to repent. Each day is a day of grace, a day to hang on to Jesus even tighter.

There will always be things that do not make sense to us in this world. We will all experience our share of sorrow and sadness. Like the Old Testament Israelites in Egypt, we will want to cry out, “Why am I suffering like this? What did I do wrong? It doesn’t make sense. God, are you there? God, do you care?” Do not worry and do not get discouraged. As God’s chosen children, you know that God is good, that God is loving, that God has already saved us. Do not be surprised or troubled you we do not understand why certain things happen at certain times to certain people. We can not understand the mind of God nor do we need to understand the mind of God. We need to know God’s heart, his love, his verdict on us. And that you can see and hear as the one hanging from the middle cross on a hill just outside Jerusalem shouts to you, “It is finished! I love you this much,” as he stretched out his hands and died.

We will not find God by using human logic or trying to analyze the cause and effect of everything that happens in this world. We will find God where he has promised to be, hidden in plain sight in the gospel – the good news message of salvation through Jesus Christ. God is right here, in his Word – spoken and read. He is under the water of baptism where he grabbed ahold of you and promised that he would never let go. He is under the bread and wine as he touches you individually that he might live in you and you in him. Each day is a day to soak in God’s love. Each day is a day to repent – to recognize your sin and rejoice in Jesus as your Savior. Amen.