

SERMON
3rd Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2010

Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

One lady wrote a note to her pastor which read; “Dear Pastor, I never knew what suffering was until I heard you preach. Now I know.”

But seriously, why do people suffer? Why do good people suffer? Is suffering a direct punishment for our sins? Is God both loving and just? How can we claim to believe in a gracious God in the face of an evil-filled world? Why do evil persons sometimes prosper while good people often endure suffering?

These are a few of those easy questions that pastors get asked all the time. And of course we always have the right answers. And if we don't, we're pretty good at either avoiding the question all together, or making up answers that sound convincing.

The fact is, sometimes there are no answers that would be satisfactory. Yet we still ask the questions when tragedy strikes. And for sure, there seems to be no lack of that these days.

Turn on the television news or pick up a newspaper in any given week and you will find a report on some catastrophic tragedy somewhere. Only the locations change. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis – all of them wreaking havoc and altering lives.

And behind them, left unreported, are the larger, but somehow less visible and dramatic tragedies – like the 30,000 children who died this past Wednesday of hunger in our world. Roughly the same number who died on Tuesday and Thursday, and every other day of the year for that matter.

In every one of those deaths, families or loved ones grieved... in every one. And at some level, every one of those grieving people probably asked the same question: “Why?” It just doesn’t seem fair. What had any of those folks done to deserve such tragic deaths?

In Jesus’ day, there was no question about fairness. The assumption was that disease, suffering, and death bore a direct correlation with human sinfulness – the greater the sin, the more likely, and more severe the misfortune. That’s why many people who were blind, lame, mute or had leprosy were considered to be unclean, and were shunned.

And to some degree, like it or not, we still think this way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in hopes that we can change what we are doing and so stop whatever has gone, or is going, wrong. You see, what we really seek above all is to have control over the chaos of our lives.

It was no different in Jesus’ time. People longed to understand and control misfortune. In today’s Gospel story, some followers were reminding Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

This appears to be referring to a well-known tragedy of the day where there was a massacre of Jewish pilgrims from Galilee, who were visiting Jerusalem. Basically, it was an incident of state-sponsored terror, which gives us a foreshadowing of Pilate’s brutality. Therefore, the underlying question was “how could these good people suffer?”

The view many people have of God is that God is an angry father, handing out punishment every time his children are disobedient.

The question that is asked time and time again is; “What did I do to deserve this.”

But this is not the God that Jesus talks about. God is not the angry Judge, judging each deed, and then giving out the punishment of sickness, death and tragedy as he sees fit. This is not the God whom we experience in Scripture. But sadly, many people believe this. They understand that everything that happens, everything good or bad comes from God.

I heard a story of a pastor named Mourice White who served a parish in Ohio. Pastor White was a very large, strong and vibrant man.

During one Lenten season, one of the older, but faithful members of the church came with her husband to an evening Lenten service. As they were leaving the service, the woman somehow fell down the outside flight of steps and broke her hip.

For some unknown cause, she did not recover from the hip surgery, and died a few days later. Pastor White stood with the grieving husband by the casket the night before the funeral.

Many people came to offer their sympathies. Some were saying to the husband, “God must have had a plan for this, so just accept it.” Another said, “It was God’s will and we must live by it.” Still another said, “Somehow God planned this to test your faith!!” And still another said, “There is a silver lining in every cloud, you will find God’s reason behind this eventually.”

Pastor White left that funeral home filled with anger at the “babbling”, as he put it, that he had heard that evening. He went to his study and rewrote the beginning of his funeral sermon.

Pastor White began his funeral sermon with these words: “My God does not push old ladies down church steps!!!”

He then proceeded to explain that God cannot be blamed or accused for all the brokenness of this world. For if God is the author of death, then how, how can he be at the same time, the author of life.

You see, Jesus knew what his followers were wondering, so he asked the question for them; “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Then, Jesus answers his own question. “No, I tell you, they were no worse than any other sinners; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Wow! This seems rather harsh.

But what Jesus is trying to get across is that there is not always a connection between how bad of a sinner you are and how much you suffer in life.

God is not some sort of sadistic maniac who sits upon his throne saying; “Well, I wonder who I will kill today? Where can I inflict some pain and suffering?” People suffer not because of God, but because of sin. Because of sin we bring suffering upon ourselves and others, and it does not always seem fair.

We have seen many examples of immense suffering during this past century. Two World Wars that included the extermination of over 6 million Jews, not to mention all those who lost their lives in battle; famine and starvation in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sudan. Earthquakes in China, Pakistan, Haiti, and Chili. Genocide in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur.

Even the United States has seen its fair share of recent suffering, from the attacks of 9-11, to the hurricane that flooded New Orleans.

Were all of these people being punished by God for some evil sin that they had committed? Believe it or not, some people, including a well known televangelist publicly stated that the earthquake in Haiti is God’s punishment for a deal with the devil. For another TV preacher, AIDS is God’s punishment for homosexuality.

And still another claimed that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment for, well, you know, just about everything that happens in New Orleans from Easter to Ash Wednesday.

The thing is, we all want to know the answer to the "why" question. Why doesn't God tell us? Why, O Lord, why?

But did you ever really wonder what you would do if God gave you a definite answer? You lose a loved one and ask, "why Lord has this happened?" Think about it. No matter what answer God gives, I will bet that it will not be good enough. After all, what kind of answer would you want? What kind of answer would be good enough?

Well, could it be that we are asking the wrong questions, or possibly the right questions in the wrong way? Our questions are so definite in nature. Whether the suffering is close to home or far away, we tend to look for definite answers to definite questions.

Tell me Jesus, why did these faithful Galileans suffer at the hand of Pontius Pilate? Jesus addresses the problem in a different way.

Instead of attempting to answer the definite question, he calls for a response which demands repentance. Jesus does not always give definite answers to definite questions. He acknowledges the suffering that happens to both the righteous and the unrighteous. He stresses that death comes to each of us. And then he calls for a response of repentance.

He calls us to turn to God who so graciously grants us time to amend our ways and to place our trust in him.

I sometimes tend to look at life as being on death row. Now I realize that that sounds kind of depressing, but think about it for a minute. Every one of us from the day we are born are dying, it's just a matter of time.

When someone comes back from the doctor and says that they are dying, they have just acknowledged what is happening to every single person on earth. The only difference is when. And if you get right down to it, none of us knows when we will die. So in a way we are on death row. Some of us just have some more appeals left than others.

Again, this is the consequence of sin. Therefore everyday that we do not die, we can be thankful for God's mercy and graciousness. Every day we are alive is a gift from God that we do not deserve. We deserve death, but God in his mercy gives us life.

So the question is not why do people suffer, but rather how can I repent? In other words, how can I turn toward God? How can I begin a new relationship with God each and every day? How can I change my ways and live a more godly life?

Lent gives us the perfect opportunity – an opportunity not only to turn to God, but to share God's love and grace with others.

Yes, because of our sinfulness we have been sentenced to death. But our God is gracious and merciful, calling us to restore our relationship with him. And that is why he sent his only Son.

Jesus not only offers us a chance to repent, but also gives us hope. Because even though every one of us will die, we still have reason for hope. In a few weeks we will celebrate the final defeat of death once and for all.

For those of us who have faith, death is only temporary, for we will dwell in God's kingdom forever and ever. Easter is coming. Repent, and live lives worthy of God's calling. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

What is it that all people and animals need to survive? *Food and water.* We also need to say warm, don't we?

Animals have fur and feathers to keep them warm. How do people stay warm? *Clothes and our houses.* Is there anything else we need to survive?

Let's see, can baby animals that come from eggs survive all by themselves? Some of them can. For instance, tiny sea turtles race for the ocean as soon as they are hatched. Little alligators don't need much help either. Even some birds can start taking care of themselves soon after they are hatched from their eggs.

But we don't hatch from eggs, do we? We are born from our mommies. So what about us, can we survive all by ourselves right after we are born?

We need someone to feed us, to change our diapers, to put clothes on us and to drive us around. People are often about eighteen years old before they can survive on their own. There might be some parents who question that.

But you know, it's not just food and water and shelter that people and animals need to survive. If a baby doesn't get love and hugs, he or she might not live very long. People need lots of love to stay healthy. So where is it that we get love and hugs and snuggles? *Moms, dads, grandmas, grandpas.*

In our first Bible story today, the prophet Isaiah tells us that God is calling us to come to him when we are hungry and thirsty. What God is wanting is to feed our souls.

Do any of you know what a soul is? *It is the place inside you where God wants to be*

God feeds our soul with his love. And we need God's love for our souls to survive, don't we? Let us pray.....