

“From the Beginning”

August 31, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Luke 13: 1-9

We want our world to make sense. We want good behavior to lead to good results and bad behavior to lead to bad results. We want our world to make sense. And when it doesn't, we have questions. Like in our Scripture lesson for today. Someone asked Jesus about a recent catastrophe. Apparently, there were some worshippers from Galilee who were offering their sacrifices in the temple when Pilate sent his soldiers to the temple and slaughtered them. This was not unusual behavior for Pilate, the Roman appointed governor over Jerusalem, but why did it happen to those worshippers. There had to be a reason they were killed and not the group that came before or after them. We want our world to make sense, so we ask, “Were they worse sinners than the other people scheduled that day? What did they do to deserve being slaughtered?”

The Old Testament is not much help with this question because it sends mixed messages. Psalm 1 boldly states you get what you deserve because, “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” So according to Psalm 1, since the worshippers in the temple perished, they must have been wicked – even if we couldn't see their wickedness. But the book of Job, on the other hand, says exactly the opposite. Job was the most righteous person on earth, yet his whole family is killed, he loses all his wealth and possessions, and ends up covered in boils, sitting in agony on an ash heap. A majority of the book is spent trying to figure out what Job did to deserve all this agony, and the answer is, nothing. He was righteous, yet he suffered greatly. So, according to Job, there is no relationship between righteousness and prosperity, wickedness and perishing? The Old Testament prophets' bread and butter was straighten-up and follow God or destruction is coming. And when the people straightened-up, things went well for them. When the people continued in their sin, they were conquered and taken into exile. Yet the Old Testament prophets themselves – the people following God, speaking for God, being obedient to God, they themselves were beaten, jailed, and executed. Jesus was beaten, jailed and executed. Does that mean Jesus and the prophets were bad people because bad things happened to them? No, they were the good guys. So at best, the Old Testament saw good being rewarded and bad being punished with Israel as a whole, but not with individuals.

The Galilean worshippers were slaughtered in the temple while doing their religious duty as good children of Abraham. They were a group, being faithful. They should have been protected. What happened didn't make sense and their Scriptures couldn't make sense of it either. So they brought it to Jesus. Jesus answered the heart of their question. Were those slaughtered by Pilate killed because they were worse sinners than everyone else? No. Jesus then broadened

the question by adding a natural disaster to their human created one. There was a tower in Jerusalem that unexpectedly fell and killed 18 people. Did they deserve to have the tower fall on them because they were the most evil people in town? No. He says it twice in our first 5 verses: there are natural consequences to stupid behavior, but not when dealing with victims of natural and human tragedy like earthquakes or hurricanes, or evil people doing evil. Hear that! What did I do to deserve getting cancer or being hit by that car or it raining on my wedding day, or lightning striking my garage? You didn't do or fail to do anything. Jesus says stuff happens and it is not the victim's fault. He said the same thing in John 9 when the disciples asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus answered "Neither." He refuses to blame the victims. But then here He adds the line, "but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did." Hold it, Jesus. You just said it was not their fault and now you say unless I repent, the same will happen to me. That sounds like it will be my fault. How could it not be their fault but will be my fault? It's only the victim's fault if I'm the victim? Then He goes on to tell a parable about a tree that didn't produce any fruit and thereby deserved to be cut down but is given one more year.

For this to make sense, we need to go back to the beginning. In the first 2 chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1&2, there is no death for people. People, male and female, were created in the image of God to manage creation. It doesn't say how long that lasted. Maybe millions of years. Maybe 2 days. But one day, Adam and Eve, the first people, were tempted to be something different than the managers God created them to be. The serpent put a bug in their ear that said if you eat of the fruit that God instructed you not to eat, "you will be like God, knowing good and evil." That is truly tempting. To be like God. To know good and evil. Instead of just doing what God wanted, they could choose what they wanted. Instead of doing what was best for the garden, they could do what was best for them. It was a real choice, because God created them with freewill. You see, God doesn't want slaves who have to obey. God wants people who choose to follow Him, who choose to love Him, who choose to obey. That day, humans chose selfishness, they chose their way over God's way. When faced with a choice, they said, "not Thy will, but mine be done." That day humans took both feet and jumped from the realm of God and placed their allegiance with the animal kingdom. Like every other animal in the animal kingdom, they chose their will over God's will, selfishness over service, arrogance over obedience. We call it survival of the fittest. And because of that, every person born after them, was born into the animal kingdom where selfishness reigns and death is a part of life.

I am good with Adam and Eve and the fall being a historical story, but I also know it is so much more. It is my story. It is your story. That is our original sin. We were born selfish. I was born selfish. I made decisions by how they affected me at the time and how I felt. I was what mattered. But we are supposed to grow out of it. Most of us don't, but we are supposed to grow to recognize God in our midst, and see how God's way leads to life while our way leads to death. We are supposed to willingly submit to God and make our selfishness, our thoughts, our

feelings subordinate to God. We call that repenting. Throughout the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, to repent is to turn away from assumptions, attitudes and actions of this selfish world and live towards the values and practices of God. Our need for repentance is not only highlighted in chapters 3, 5, 13, 15 and 24 of Luke; but is the focus of the Church's birth at Pentecost in Acts 2 when the crowds asked, "What should we do?" and Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized." Acts goes on from there and emphasizes repenting as the first step toward the realm of God in chapters 3, 5, 8, 11, 13, 17, 19, 20 and 26.

Jesus gave us the defining picture of repenting. When His life was on the line, He said, "not My will, but Thine be done." Jesus jumped with both feet from the selfish realm of the animal kingdom to God's realm. Repentance is changing how we think. Changing the subject of our thoughts. Moving from our will to God's will. Reversing what happened with Adam and Eve in the fall. When we center our lives in this world and work to make things revolve around us, we deserve to die like all the other animals of this world. That is why Jesus said, "unless you repent you will all perish just as they did." Repenting is the first step toward the God of eternity.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree getting another year to produce fruit combined with His, "Unless you repent you will all perish as they did," does a masterful job of maintaining both the judgment of God and the grace of God. God demands that we bear fruit and not just consume resources. If we fail to, we will perish forever. That is God's justice. But God also gives us a little more time and help to turn ourselves around and start bearing the fruit of repentance. That is the grace. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow about His promise... but is patient... not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance." We have been given more time to repent, and in Jesus we have been given a chance to be forgiven and start fresh in bearing fruit worthy of repentance, but there are expectations and there is a time limit.

Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith proclaimed "not My will, but Thine be done"; and with that moved from Adam's line that leads to death, to God's line that leads to life. Romans 5 uses that terminology. Yes, Jesus experienced death, just like I experienced middle school – we got through it. But Jesus didn't just get through it. Jesus paved the way through it – paved the way through death to heaven. And we follow that way through repentance and choosing God's will. Those who don't follow, don't make it through. And it only makes sense because heaven is a place where God's will is done every minute of every day. We pray each week for God's will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Therefore, people who choose God's will find a home there, but for people who do not choose to follow Jesus, who choose to follow some other way of life, going to heaven and having to live in God's will is not what they have chosen. I know some Christians believe everyone goes to heaven because a loving God would never send anyone to eternal torment or even the eternal darkness of death without eternal life. But a loving God would not enslave people either. If God brings everyone to heaven where God's will is done every minute of every day, that would be slavery to those who haven't

chosen it. God created us with freewill from the beginning that we might choose to love and follow Him. Yes, I believe God takes into account if we die young, and God's grace covers what we hadn't had a chance to learn yet, but I also believe that what we believe, say and do matters. It matters here, and it matters to God.

I share all this with you today to help you recognize the significance of today's baptism – of your own baptism. It is a sign of repentance, of placing your allegiance with Jesus and His submission to God as opposed to this world and its allegiance to Adam and Eve. Does that mean we will always make the right decision and always successfully identify and follow God's will? No. But it does mean that is where our heart is, our desire is, our home is. And God welcomes us home, even if our way there was not straight.

Mike Van Heyningen