

“Falling Towers and Failing Fig Trees”

Luke 13:1-9; 1 Cor. 10:1-13

Third Sunday in Lent: March 7, 2010

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“Falling Towers and Failing Fig Trees.” The title of the sermon was suggested by today’s Gospel lesson, Luke chapter 13, verses 1-9.

Thornton Wilder’s classic 1927 novel, *Bridge Of San Luis Rey*, begins with the collapse of an ancient bridge in eighteenth century Peru which sent five people to their deaths. A Franciscan monk, Brother Juniper, witnesses this tragedy and is determined to discover the reason God singled out these five for premature death. He tells himself: “If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan.” The remainder of the book is the narration of their life stories leading up to the moment they crossed the bridge. Juniper’s question and his quest are not new. They lie at the heart of today’s Epistle and Gospel lessons.

Why do bad things happen? Why does a bridge collapse in Peru . . . why does the worst earthquake in history hit an already impoverished nation like Haiti . . . snatching the life of young and old with no rhyme or reason . . . and another earthquake close on its heels in Chile? Why is AIDS decimating the continent of Africa? Brother Juniper’s quest to find an answer is a failed one. After adding up the totals for victims and survivors, he discovers that the dead were often more worthy of saving than those who lived. Suffering is not punishment. It is not an opportunity to point a finger and blame those who suffer. We are not given leeway to somehow distinguish ourselves from those who suffer, and then shield ourselves from suffering. Inevitably, attempts to explain the whys of suffering and evil fail when confronted with actual suffering. Suffering requires, not an explanation, but action and a response. It can be an opportunity to learn, grow, and be transformed.

In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus is asked: “Why, Jesus? Why were those particular Galileans murdered by Pilate in an act of terrorism? Were they bad people? Were their sins greater than other people’s sins? Why, Jesus? And why were those eighteen innocent people

killed when the Tower of Siloam fell onto an unsuspecting crowd? Had those folks done something particularly awful that led God to punish them?”

Each one of us here today could probably add our own examples. Why, God? On a personal note, why did my stepfather – as good a man as you’re going to find – why did he have to deal with terminal, terrible, tyrannical cancer and die? Why, God? Or perhaps your question is: Why did my child, or my grandchild, die when he or she was so young? Was it our fault ...the family’s fault ...or my fault? Were we being punished? Why, God? Why did my job get eliminated? Or, why did I end up in such a dysfunctional relationship or family? Or, why did my child get into the wrong crowd and end up in trouble with the law? Why, God? Or, why do people shoot loved ones and then shoot themselves? Why did terrorists attack our country on September 11, 2001? Why? Why? Why? Were those people who were victims of such a horrendous tragedy picked out through some sort of divine lottery to endure horrific injury and death? Jesus, come on, tell me, tell us, why?

Before we turn to Jesus’ response in today’s Gospel lesson, let us not lose sight of the helpful words of the apostle on this same subject of suffering in today’s Epistle lesson. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 10, the apostle cites several examples of God’s people having difficulties. He tells us that these examples are to remind us that God is endlessly patient and forever present with us during difficult days. God’s people have had difficulties in the past and will have struggles today. The apostle wants us to know that God will help us. We need to ask God for help. He reminds us that God accepts us and loves us through our difficulties. We should name our difficulties before God in prayer – as our forebears, especially the psalmists did – because God has heard the cries of God’s people throughout all generations. God will be with us and will empower us to work through whatever we may face.

Now we come back to consider the response and example of Jesus in the face of suffering. Both in Jesus’ words in the gospel this morning – and in his example on the cross – Jesus refuses to dignify the question “Why?” with an answer. You see, for Jesus the why is not what suffering is all about. In the mind and experience of Jesus, towers do fall . . . bridges do collapse . . .bad things, evil things happen. It is part of the fabric of creation; it is part of what we call “the permissive will of God,” meaning that an all powerful God – for

mysterious and unfathomable reasons – allows evil and suffering in order to preserve the freedom of creation.

Earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and other natural disasters happen in the creative energy, the randomness, the freedom of natural law. Shootings in schools, on college campuses, on military bases, and in places of employment, as well as acts of terrorism, and other evil things happen in the perverse human freedom of moral law. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't care; nor does it mean that God is absent ...far from it. In fact, evil, fear, intrigue, jealousy and ambition end up nailing Jesus to a cross. And what does God do? God embraces the suffering of God's own Son. God endures the suffering. God confronts the suffering. And God transforms the suffering – into the creativity of new life. For Jesus, the question is not “why?”: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The question is “how?”: “How do we live and how do we endure in a world where towers fall and bridges collapse?”

To answer this question, Jesus says, “Repent – or you will perish like they did.” “Repent” means to “turn”: to turn away from the “why” question and to turn toward the “how” question ...to turn away from blaming – blaming those in authority, or blaming God, or blaming the victims. Instead it simply means to “turn” and to stay close ...stay close to God ...stay grounded and connected to God's grace. Why? Because when towers topple, and tragedies happen – and certainly they will – God can and will sustain us.

Are towers falling in your life? Health towers, financial towers, employment towers, relationship towers? Is there suffering? Then hear the voice of Jesus who says, “I will hang from the crosses of your tragedy and crisis, of your deception and doubt, of your fear and despair. I will weep with you. I will never abandon you. You may suffer. You may even die. But you will not perish – unloved and alone – *when* you turn and stay close to me.”

Jesus ends his lesson in today's Gospel reading by telling the parable of the fig tree. He tells the story in order to remind us just what kind of God we have. God is not like a landowner who rips us out and throws us away when we don't produce good fruit. No. Instead, God is like a wise and patient gardener – who gives us a second and a third and a fourth chance to root ourselves in holy ways. God, the gardener, prunes, digs and fertilizes

us. Then God waits – waits for the seeds of God’s creativity in us to finally blossom into fruitful lives for the world. Yes, far from a God who causes towers to fall and who murders innocent Galileans, our God is a gardener who has all the time in the world for us to grow into spiritual maturity and ripeness. And, who knows? The towers that fall . . . the bridges that collapse – the seemingly unfair pain and suffering, difficulties and distress in the world – may cause us to respond and act in ways that actually cultivate our developing souls . . . may make us stronger characters, better people . . . more like God’s Son who knew suffering in his life.

Martin Gray was a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Holocaust. Following World War II, he married, raised a family, and became successful in business. But then, once again, tragedy struck in his life. One day his wife and children were all killed in a forest fire that swept through their home in south France. He was distraught after this senseless loss, and friends encouraged him to launch an investigation into why this horror had happened. Instead, Martin Gray began a passionate movement to protect nature from future fires. He explained to his friends that an investigation would focus only on the past, on issues of pain and sorrow and blame – on accusing other people of being responsible for his misery. He wasn’t interested in asking “why?” He was only interested in asking “how?” *How* can I live into the future – in life affirming, and not life denying ways? *How* can I live *for* something, not just *against* something?

Today Jesus presents us with a major dilemma. It is the choice of Lent. Are we stuck in the past, or do we believe in the future? Are we living *against* something, or are we living *for* something? Do we want answers to the “why” questions, or do we rather want to know *how* to live for God and with God in a broken world where towers fall and fig trees fail?

This day, Jesus is offering to lift us from our sea of suffering, from our confusion, from our pain ...from whatever the falling towers and failing fig trees of today’s Gospel lesson symbolize in our lives ...offering to lift and turn us toward the mercy and the grace of God. This is today’s Good News ...this is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Jesus Christ!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.