

Fair Warning

Luke 13:1-9

When I heard the news the other morning about a workplace rampage by a gunman in Kansas, I wondered, would those who were killed have had any inkling that their life would end that day? Would anyone have agreed with the gunman that it was justified? The same could be said about the six people murdered by a crazed Uber driver in Kalamazoo, Michigan last weekend. Who deserves such a fate?

This thought often goes through my mind when I hear about senseless deaths, or those that are unforeseen and tragic. Does anyone know their death is imminent—that their life on earth will suddenly, and traumatically, be over? Does anyone consider it just?

Yet, meaningless misfortune like this is a daily occurrence, regardless of the sorrow and remorse that gets expressed. We could add any number of tragedies, be they traffic accidents, natural disasters, senseless violence, or terminal conditions of one type or another. We hear about these things and sigh, then count our blessings for not being numbered among them, often with a proverbial, “ah, but for the grace of God go I.”

But where is God in all of this? Where’s the promise we have of divine protection? Since terrible things can happen to anyone with no apparent reason or distinction, what role does religious faith really have? Does unwarranted tragedy suggest that our trust in God little more than a wish projection?

These aren’t questions with simple answers. Theodicy, or the question of why God allows for human suffering, has been an ongoing mystery since the human race rose from dust. One part of it is dealing with *natural evil*, which is the consequence of disasters, plagues, diseases, and

other traumas brought on by Nature and its forces. The other is *moral evil*, which occurs when people choose and act in ways that result in wrong, instead of right—normally defined specific to a set of laws or tradition. Moral evil is easier to address in a cause-and-effect manner, since we can account for human mistakes, misjudgments, and malice and intentional harm. There’s a direct (or indirect) relationship between the motivations and actions of a person to explain the consequences of what they do and what evil occurs for which offenders can be held accountable.

However, it’s harder to do this with natural evil. Random acts of trauma within Nature can only be construed as fate, misfortune, or “an act of God” (which covers the unexplainable, even for insurance companies). From the earliest times, religious beliefs, rituals, and practices have existed to control the uncontrollable and protect humankind from what is random and unforeseen. Faith in a divine being who is all-knowing and all-powerful is central to this and common the world over, in part to provide answers in a cause-and-effect way to help explain why senseless harm occurs.

Related to this, within many traditions and belief systems, the role divine beings play is to hold human beings accountable, with judgment and retribution coming in the form of sudden or unexplainable death, often through some tragic coincidence or natural disaster. We have it in our Christian heritage (even our Scriptures!) which often conveys this judgmental tone and message at various points, explaining away tragedy and misfortune as God’s wrathful judgment upon sinners. But is that true? Is it even fair? Is that how God works, or is it only how humans want it to be?

We humans have a common tendency in many situations to resort to *blaming the victim*—a crude, but conventional, way of explaining the inexplicable by concluding that victims deserved their fate—that it was God’s retributive justice at work. It’s a way to make sense of something we don’t understand or want to understand.

Yet, we don’t have to be reminded of the impact simplistic judgments like this have on many people, where they are left to feel, as Job’s friends did to him, as if misfortune is their fault—more than that, it’s a divine punishment upon them. As we might expect, not only is this poor theology, it’s actually a very convenient way for humans to dismiss each other’s pain. Blaming the victim doesn’t require the world to change, only for victims to accept their fate, whatever that might be. For that reason, blaming a victim is actually a cruel moral evil inflicted upon those who suffer when tragedies occur.

This is the underlying message behind this unusual story that is our text for today. It’s a story that happens to be unique to Luke, not shared by any of the other gospels. Not only is it unique, but it also is one of the least investigated and explored texts in the New Testament canon. I can only surmise that most interpreters bypass the contextual clues and, as a result, draw conclusions about it that, in my opinion, are incorrect. It’s because they think Jesus in these verses is only referring to the randomness of death, and because of this, the underlying message is: you should always be prepared to meet your maker at any time and repent before it’s too late. You never know if this is your last day on earth. Though this may be a true statement, it’s not what I feel is the message of this particular passage or, for that matter, of the gospel itself!

The message Luke is conveying, I believe, is actually rooted in the anecdotal interpretation of these two presenting cases of random and unexpected death. Let's take a look at them.

First, we have a reference to an incident in the Jerusalem temple where some Galilean Jews were slaughtered under Pilate's orders when they had gone there to make sacrifice—most likely occurring at Passover. Jesus describes them like this: “Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices.” Apparently, once people heard the news, the public perception was that the victims deserved their fate—that they were guilty of some grievous sin, especially if YHWH wouldn't even save them while doing their religious duty in the temple.

This, then, is followed by another anecdote, i.e., a reference to the Tower of Siloam in Jerusalem collapsing and killing eighteen people which, as well, was spun in “blaming the victim” fashion: their random, accidental death was apparently cast as an act of retribution by YHWH in judgment of them. So are the tales that get told.

However, instead of parroting this public opinion, Jesus challenged it by asking if his listeners believed these terrible incidents occurred because the victims were guilty of greater sins than any of them. In doing so, he was challenging two common assumptions: 1) that victims deserved their fate for some known or unknown reason—always a cause and effect, and 2) that because his listeners hadn't suffered a similar fate, they were, by inference, inherently better.

Before we get to that, I want to step back and raise the crucial point: why would these two incidents be cited, especially if the tower collapse was clearly a random and terrible accident, while in the other, it would seem the real criminal behind it would have been Pilate? Why would people need to

blame the victims, instead of expressing sympathy for them and their families?

To answer that, let's imagine the story behind the story in each of these instances, even if doing so is only speculation. Let's start with the context. As we know, this entire region was restive during this period of Roman occupation. Any demonstration of Jewish nationalism typically centered around the temple in Jerusalem. Passover was the key festival each year when messianic dreams and insurrectionist ambitions were heightened, as we see in the stories related to Holy Week. Galilee was also a center of rebel activity. So if we add two and two together, it's likely that what occurred in this incident was a group of zealous Jewish nationalists from Galilee used the Passover festival as a basis to incite the Jewish pilgrims to rise up against Roman occupation. In so doing, they were mercilessly slaughtered by Pilate's command. For me, this is the only logical explanation for why people were enraged that the Roman governor, Pilate, committed a sacrilege by murdering some fellow Galileans in the most sacred setting for Judaism! That should have created an uproar—people would have been expected to take to the streets! Instead, the story is conveyed as if the victims were in the wrong—that they were the sinners!

So who would have viewed Galilean rebels with such scorn? Those who benefitted in some way from the current occupation, or who viewed insurrection as a threat to the social order. The only ones who might fit that description were Jewish social and political elites and Jesus' spiritual rivals, the religious leadership, many of whom were deeply invested in maintaining the status quo. For all of them, Pilate and his ruthless authority represented law and order in society—his centurions policed the

streets, while the rebels were a threat. Blaming the victims was easy when they were portrayed as the provocateurs! They deserved their fate!

The other incident is similar, and the key there is who the victims were. According to the Greek, they were called *opheletai*, which is the word for “debtors.” Most scholars have interpreted this to mean they were indebted to God, hence it’s often translated, “sinners.” That would buttress their belief that God’s retributive justice was being carried out in their sudden and random death with the collapse of the tower. God must have known how wretched these “sinners” were, so they deserved their fate. Blame the victims, as it was common to do.

Except, in Jesus’ day, “debtor” meant exactly what it should have meant, namely, that these were people who suffered from a terrible burden of debt. Listen to this explanation of first-century debtors:

The processes in which peasants fell into debt were many...The chief reason...was the excessive demand placed on peasant resources. Demands for tithes, taxes, tribute, and the endless variety of tolls kept small landowners under heavy pressure...Peasants unable to repay loans of seed or capital frequently became tenant sharecroppers on their own land...

Throughout the first century there apparently was a gradual increase in tenancies paid for in money in place of sharecropping...The result was a concentration of land in the hands of large landholders who foreclosed on peasant land put up for security for...loans. Late in the first century the numbers of peasants fleeing because of hopeless indebtedness grew so large that it required imperial efforts to keep tenants on land being left unworked—a situation that developed because, once in debt, few peasants could escape it...¹

So, in all likelihood, this incident involved poor peasants in debt who, left to minimal subsistence and selling themselves as day-laborers who became the victims in question. This is backed up by the fact that, under Pilate’s rule, an aqueduct was built adjacent to the wall of Siloam to bring in fresh water to the city and the social elites who lived within city walls. This

¹ Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress, 1992, pg. 63.

aqueduct would have been built by cheap labor, meaning day-laborers, who apparently were killed in the process of dismantling part of the wall for the aqueduct. A freak accident like this had to be blamed on someone. If you benefitted from the system, you couldn't blame the system or its patrons; it had to be the workers. Again, blame the victims.

So what we have here is not Jesus' philosophical musings about a case of random tragedies that are meant to warn people about the unpredictability of their own death and need to make things right before God. No, his call to repentance was different; it echoes the same call made by John the Baptist earlier in the gospel. In excoriating the Jewish elites, Roman soldiers, and other powerbrokers who came to him, John cried out:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance...

which meant to stop cheating the system, stop oppressing the poor, start building a just society, rather than one that is set up to create endless debt, or lead desperate people to violence, or segregate the haves from the have-nots!

Jesus and John were not falling to conventional clichés that privileged people propagate that everyone is equal and has equal opportunity to better themselves. That is only the propaganda of the people who game the system in their favor! The only fair and just world is one where people truly do watch out for their suffering and disadvantaged neighbors, not blame them for their circumstances.

In the eyes of God, the true sinners were the very ones who maintained an oppressive system that took advantage of the misfortune of others—all for the sake of protecting their power, wealth, status, honor, and privilege! Both Jesus and John were calling out and holding accountable

those who could not and would not bring about a truly just and noble nation, because their self-interests and ambitions got in the way. But Jesus and John were also giving them fair warning to recognize their own guile and complicity with and support of fundamental social and economic injustices within their nation before there would be a day of reckoning from the very God they claimed to honor. Of course, that day came within Luke's lifetime with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

That is the intended message of the following parable—that Israel, the fig tree, would be given another chance to bear the fruits of true justice, with the help of the gardener (that being Jesus & the prophets), rather than being ripped up and destroyed. The gospel that Jesus proclaimed, and in whose spirit it is intended to reflect, is meant to be good news to the poor and a fair warning to those who stand in the way of God's intentions. They will have their chance to repent. The moral evil of this world is often found in those who protect their privileges, not in those who suffer in pain.

Honestly, after this past week, I wonder if we in this country need to listen to the fair warnings in our own society. Agree or disagree, it's not easy for me to look at the gun violence and presume this is just a problem caused by the lunatic fringe. Nor is it just a crime against unfortunate victims. It certainly is not as random as we think it is. The same holds true with the terrible economic inequities we tolerate in this society.

I ask myself every time, what will it take before we, as a society, recognize these fundamental injustices where we needlessly put so many lives at risk. "There, but for the grace of God go I" isn't good enough. Nor is blaming the victims and distancing ourselves from their pain. Our collective tolerance of the status quo and complacency toward righting

these wrongs will continue to haunt our society, as well as our safety, until the land we love is no more a land we can love.

Let me close with the thoughts of Martin Luther King, Jr., who shared this perspective in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” with a voice like that of Jesus which rings with stunning relevance today:

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. ...I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly...

The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before...

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour...

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and that the sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice [and economic injustice] will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of their scintillating beauty. ²

May our consciences be stirred and our perspectives aligned with that of God and the prophets, who gave us fair warning to repent before it's too late.

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² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James Washington, ed., Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986, pp. 290, 300, 302.

