

Bad Things Happen

Luke 13:1-5

It's been a rough week for the folks in and around Houston, hasn't it? Our Facebook pages and TV screens have been filled with incredible images. Our hearts have broken as we've seen the thousands of people filling emergency shelters and we know more than 40 people have died. Our hearts have swelled as we've seen the heroism of the Texas National Guard and the volunteers of the Cajun Navy pulling people from the floodwaters. We've prayed for God's protection of our friends and loved ones in the path of the storm and we've given thanks for those who have made it through safely. And we are determined to help those who have lost everything, just as we helped the folks on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Katrina.

But maybe, as you've seen senior citizens sitting in chest-deep water or heard folks describe the anguish of losing all their possessions, you've had other thoughts as well. Maybe you've wondered, as the title of Rabbi Harold Kushner's book puts it, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People." Maybe you don't understand why a sovereign, loving God allows things like this to happen.

If so, you're not alone. Way back in the time of the patriarchs, over 3000 years ago, Job had the same sorts of questions. And as we see from today's passage, so did the people of Jesus' time.

Now, the problem that initiated the discussion in today's passage was more similar to the problems of Andrew Brunson than the victims of Hurricane Harvey. It started out with a group of people who came to Jerusalem from Galilee. This was the area in which Jesus had grown up, so it's not unlikely that He had known some of them personally. But while they had intended to worship God in the Temple, Pontius Pilate had other ideas. For some reason, he had them killed, perhaps even in the very act of offering their sacrifices.

Now, we don't have any historical records about this particular event. But we do know that this sort of brutality wasn't at all foreign to Pilate. Even Herod Agrippa I, no shrinking violet himself, described Pilate as "naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness."

For example, although Pilate knew the people would be violently opposed to it, he had brought military standards, long poles with carved eagles on the top, into Jerusalem. No previous governor had dared to do this, as the Jews considered the presence of any images in the Holy City to be a clear violation of the second commandment. The people demonstrated so forcefully that Pilate was forced to remove the standards.

So, perhaps the Galileans discussed in today's passage simply got caught up in one of the many popular demonstrations against Roman cruelty. Perhaps they ended up being what Pilate would have considered to be collateral damage. But whatever the reason, these people who were just trying to worship ended up dying along with the sacrifices they had brought to the Temple. Surely, they didn't deserve that, right?

Now, the next example Jesus gives would be much more familiar to the people of Southeast Texas. It seems that a tower fell in Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam, killing some people. Again, we aren't sure of the exact spot – after all, the Romans did quite a thorough job of destroying the city some 40 years after today's passage took place. But we know that Herod the Great had been a prolific

builder, and that his reconstruction of the Temple was still going on at this time, so perhaps part of this project went wrong somehow. Again, surely the people who were killed didn't deserve that, right?

So, in today's passage, Jesus presents two distinct examples of people who have died – some who were caught up in the brutality of a tyrant, and others who suffered a terrible accidental catastrophe. The question for Him is the same as it is for us – why did God allow this to happen?

So, what's the answer? Well, Jesus begins in verse 2 by pointing out what is not the answer. In fact, he refutes the same error that Job's friends had made so many years before. You see, Job's friends had done a simple spiritual calculation. They were right to state that God was just and merciful and powerful. But here's where they went wrong: they assumed that since Job was suffering, He must have done something wrong to deserve it. They reasoned that a loving, powerful God wouldn't allow Job to suffer so terribly unless such pain somehow served to satisfy God's justice. They were wrong, but that's what they believed.

And it seems as if Jesus' listeners had the same sort of idea. Jesus' questions in verses two and four imply that they did in fact believe that those Galilean worshippers must have somehow had it coming to them, and that those on whom the tower at Siloam fell also must have deserved to die. Jesus' listeners apparently believed that suffering only happens to bad people.

Why would anyone believe this? Well, it allows us to imagine that we are somehow in control of our lives. For if only bad people suffer, then to avoid suffering all we have to do is to be "good," however we might define goodness. If we believe what Job's friends and Jesus' listeners believed, then we can kid ourselves into thinking that nothing bad will happen to us or to our loved ones.

But such belief is really just a modified form of paganism. For remember, pagans are the ones who believe that if they appease the right gods with the right sacrifices, and if they'll just do the right sorts of rituals at the right times in the right way, they'll have the pleasure and wealth they desire. TV preachers still encourage this sort of thinking whenever they guarantee that blessings will follow donations made to their ministries.

So, yes, it's so easy, so comforting for us to imagine that we are in control of life, that we've got this. Perhaps we demonstrate such a belief when we eat right and exercise and read our Bibles and pray and come to worship, if we imagine that because we do all these good things, we've somehow earned God's favor, that we've somehow insulated ourselves and our loved ones from harm. And so we go on in our smug delusions of competence – until the Roman or the Turkish soldiers show up and the towers collapse and 50 inches of rain fall on Houston. That's when we stand with Jesus' listeners in today's passage and wonder – why did God allow this to happen?

Well, how did Jesus answer this question? Having defined his listeners' rather pagan belief that great suffering only comes to great sinners, His one word answer to such thinking is this: "Nay. No." They were wrong, and Job's friends were wrong. Job didn't suffer more than his friends because he was a worse sinner than they were. The Galileans who got caught up in Pilate's merciless attacks and the folks who were crushed when the tower of Siloam fell on them weren't worse sinners than the rest of the people in Jerusalem. And the folks in Rockport and Houston and Beaumont and Port Arthur aren't worse sinners than the rest of the people in America, either.

So, why do these bad things happen? I think it's very interesting that Jesus does not, in fact, answer that question, at least not in this passage. And you know, Job never did find out why he had to suffer, either. When God showed up, He rebuked Job's friends. He said they were wrong to assume that Job was a spectacular sinner. But God never explained to Job why he had had to suffer.

And that's the case for most of us for most of the time. For the fact is that in a sinful, messed up world, people often get caught up in the mess, regardless of what they did or didn't do. And we can all give examples of this, can't we? Andrew Brunson didn't do anything to get thrown in a Turkish prison – he's just a political pawn in the Turks' attempt to gain influence over America. Closer to home, it wasn't my mama's fault that a guy in a truck ran into the driver's side door of her Volkswagen when she was 30, causing a wreck that left her in pain for the rest of her life. And she didn't do anything to bring on her Alzheimer's disease. Those things just happened, just the way that Hurricane Harvey just happened.

So, is there anything we can learn from events like Andrew's imprisonment? Is there anything we can learn from Hurricane Harvey? Well, what lesson did Jesus draw from the terrible events discussed in today's passage? What did He want His listeners to learn from the murderous rage of tyrants or the random destruction of accidents? It's pretty clear: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Now, that's not exactly what we want to hear, is it? For after Jesus has pointed out that the victims of injustice and those who suffer accidents don't deserve it any more than anyone else does, He then turns around to say that, when you get right down to it, all of us really deserve the same thing. All of us deserve to be slaughtered by brutal soldiers or thrown in a Turkish prison. All of us deserve to be crushed by falling stones. All of us deserve to be drowned in 50 inches of rain, just as the whole world was drowned in the days of Noah. For, as Paul puts it in his epistle to the Romans, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All of us are rebels against God's righteous rule, and all of us have earned the death penalty.

But Jesus does give us a way to avoid this fate. No, He doesn't do what the pagans want – giving us some sort of magic talisman that will ward off evil and make our lives go smoothly. He also doesn't do what His listeners want, restoring their illusion of control over the world by explaining why sufferers somehow especially deserve the catastrophes that befall them. Instead, He uses these everyday sorts of catastrophes as object lessons to point us to the opportunity for a greater deliverance. He promises that we can be saved from eternal death, from eternal separation from God – if we will repent.

Repentance – this is the same thing we saw the people of Ezra's time do over the last several weeks, isn't it? Repentance involves an encounter with God's Word, which leads to a realization that we've done wrong. It involves sorrow over our sin, and confession of how we've broken God's law. But repentance must include not only a change of heart but also a change of life, a turning away from self and a turning toward God, a rejection of our will and an acceptance of God's will.

And isn't this the sort of thing that Jesus Himself had to do in the Garden of Gethsemane? No, He didn't have any sin to put away from His life. But didn't He have to turn away from His Will, saying to the Father, "Not my will, but Thine be done?" And didn't He put that determination into action on the cross?

And so it turns out that the One who so solemnly warns us in today's passage that we must repent or we will die actually did both of those things. He rejected His self-interest in order to embrace God's will. And he died on the cross because that was the only way to complete God's great plan of redemption.

Yes, Jesus willingly suffered the brutality of the Roman soldiers so that we might be freed from the punishment our sins deserved. Jesus was crushed not by rocks but by the weight of the sins of the whole world so that we might be freed from the power of sin and death. He was drowned in the depths of God's wrath so that we might be able to repent, to turn to God, receiving His welcome and pardon, loving Him with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

So, what can we learn from terrible disasters like Hurricane Harvey? What can we learn from grave injustices like that being suffered by Andrew Brunson? We can get a glimpse of what all our sins deserve. We can be grateful that Jesus has both warned us to repent and suffered so that we might be able to repent. And we can be amazed at the reason that Jesus warned us and suffered so much for sinners like us – because He loves us so much.