

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 55:3–9

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 13:1-5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them- do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Falling Swords and Falling Towers

A pastor spends a significant amount of time on scripture. Because of this, it does not take long to realize that sometimes there are huge gaps in the reporting of the gospel story. This New Testament scripture is one of them. As I reflected on these verses in preparation, I recalled why they seemed so familiar. I searched my files, and I had never prepared a sermon from this portion of *Luke*. However, I did recall a thorough study of this passage during my second year in seminary. I found the outline for what is known as an **exegesis** for this scripture lesson: bringing out God’s Word from scripture.

In my study this week, I went through these verses again in the original Greek, and they remain as abrupt and sharp as our excellent translation we read this morning. The subject here is never stated fully, but implied by the circumstances of two different disasters. Did you pick up on them? They have in common that they involved two different groups of people: pious Jews from Galilee, injured or killed offering sacrifices likely at the temple in Jerusalem, and common laborers working on the fortifications of Jerusalem, the tower of Siloam. Indeed, most likely the workers were pressed into service for the Romans. As common peasants, the laboring people, mostly Jews, were likely too busy working to keep the Jewish laws, and probably died unclean and **unrepentant**. It would be like having a fatal accident driving down the road, deep in thought on a project at home or an upcoming meeting. You would not have time to prepare for an unpredicted end of life.

The remarkable thing about the five verses is that Jesus touches on the ultimate fate of human beings which is death. In addition, Jesus touches on other core aspects of the human experience: the free choice humans have, the presence of evil and violence in the world, and the presence, or absence, of God in natural and unnatural disasters and other events. In short, this thing is packed with meaning and controversy, depending on which person picks up the *Bible* and reads these verses. The **filter** for interpreting them is our view of God along with our belief in God as **sovereign**, that is, independent of you and me.

Otherwise, anyone would read this story and remark: “**How did this story get in here?**” It is different from the verses that precede and follow it. The two stories are incomplete to us, because we have no other knowledge about them. So, there are inherent difficulties throughout this passage. And, regardless of how we state or interpret this portion of scripture, Jesus tell us in quite certain, concrete terms and stark language that we all had best **repent**: We do not know the time and hour when we will meet our **death**. Despite this serious tone, all of this brings to mind an old song from the last century: “Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.”

Let’s face it: This is a harsh reading, no matter how you rephrase it, reshape it, or redirect it. The main theme here is that **bad things** will happen, even to good and **undeserving** people. But, Jesus implies that the **faithful** are not hindered by the calamity that might befall them. Of course, if you are still in doubt about it all, Jesus is saying that now is the time to figure out all of this.

I hope that what follows is not a distraction for this message today. But, I offer it because of my personal experience that overlaps with these themes and these verses. Due to a chronic health issue involving my heart, I had to modify some aspects of my life, mostly giving up vigorous exercise. Life was pretty unremarkable from the standpoint of my health for many years. But, on April 30, 2012 during my time in seminary, I quit my studies about 7 PM and changed clothes to go out and walk a mile or two for exercise. And, after bending forward to pick up my shoes, I noticed my heart beating very fast; furthermore, I could feel each beat in my chest. Some warmth came over the front of my chest and some pain in my jaw and both shoulders. I knew that very likely I was in a fatal heart rhythm.

Fortunately, I had my cell phone, and despite my reasoning getting a bit fuzzy, I did call 9-1-1, and the dear, dedicated dispatcher talked me through all the information needed for the emergency personnel to come to my aid. They arrived within 5 minutes, just as I was losing consciousness. I gave the briefest medical history to the technicians as they began putting in the intravenous lines and getting the vital signs. I was just thinking, “Wow, I am in good hands!”

And then, I noticed that I was no longer breathing. Telling this part used to put me into tears, but I will say simply that I knew that if something didn’t change for the better, I was gone from this existence. Unfortunately, I was unable to communicate anything! I had no breath in my lungs, much less oxygen for my brain. Remarkably, I could still hear all the conversation, especially a discussion concerning the pattern of my heart rhythm and their needing to decide when to intubate me and to apply the defibrillator. In my mind I yelled: “Fellas, that’s a distraction- Help me here! Get me out of this!” But, no sound came from me.

So, if you used to wonder what this moment might be like, I will relate my experience to you. Was I prepared to die? I would like to think so, but as I contemplated this, thinking I soon would slip into unconsciousness, I was amazed that my mind just kept going. They call this a

“near-death experience,” because the person recalls the events without losing track of time. Most survivors recall a light in the distance and being drawn to it. I will confirm all of that. But, the most lasting and remarkable aspect was that the horrible, aching chest pain was gone! A sense of warmth and security took over. And, a sense of movement began: up and away from all recognizable surroundings.

Was I prepared to meet Jesus? Oh yes, that thought remained before me; and, I began reciting the 23rd *Psalms*, which brought great comfort and assurance that something extraordinary and **good** was about to happen. Did I repent of my sins? Well, sort of- in a big flash. I was fully aware that I was headed to a destination of some kind, and it was all good: There was **no fear**, no anxiety, **no worry** at all.

Well, I did not die, of course. I was intubated and shocked out my fatal heart rhythm. I woke up in the ambulance and again in the ER, pretty well knowing I was not dead. Slowly returning to reality, I recognized that I was still alive and pretty ecstatic about it!

But, I was unable to completely take in all of the events that had just happened. And, for months it was very difficult to articulate what I just described to you. Later that year, I was asked what I had learned from this by both a professor in seminary and a member of a committee here in presbytery.

“Did you meet Jesus, or did you feel that you encountered God?”, they asked.

“No,” I said, “I didn’t meet Jesus, but I have a feeling that I was in his neighborhood: All I needed was his address.”

So, to some people this could seem like a wild tale. However, there are many others who have had similar experiences. Perhaps, we could include some of you in this group with near-death experiences. But, for our purposes today, here is what I took away from that life-altering event:

- Be **prepared**: We can leave this existence at any moment. It can happen with something as simple as bending forward to pick up a shoe!
- Be **aware**- life is going on all around us. You and I may, or may not, get involved in activities in the same way, but I believe Christ is telling us here, and that his ministry revealed, that we must know that we are created to **engage** with others.
- Be **persistent** in worship, prayer, and study. Our engagement with God is a deep and **transforming** experience if we will open ourselves to it, however gradually that might occur.
- Be willing to **serve** another: That means another person, another cause, another person’s freedom, another nation’s needs, and **any neighbor** in need. Remember, that **everyone** is your neighbor (*Luke 10: 29-37*).

I present these recommendations to you, because Jesus is saying that there are no “do-overs” in living. Be prepared. Or, as Jesus says: **Repent**. That is, prepare as best you can and **believe** in God and in Christ.

At this point, we might wonder why this particular group of verses is presented to us in the middle of **Lent**. To get some perspective this morning, recall that Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem, teaching and preaching and healing on the way. People ask him questions, and he answers them. He informs them of his insights in sayings and in sermons. And, this road he was on was the same road that was followed for a **pilgrimage** for worship in the temple for most of

the Jewish faithful. But, for Jesus this is his **final** mission and ministry: This trip results in his death and his **resurrection**.

As we said previously, it is no secret that these verses really are a brief and **odd group** of sayings. They describe **swords falling** on the innocent near the temple and **towers** suddenly falling down on those who were unaware and unprepared. Perhaps, these **two stories** originally were unrelated to each other. Or, perhaps they were presented at different times in unrelated settings, but kept a common theme? Perhaps, the concept of **undeserved tragedy**, which is common to both stories, united these words of Jesus for those who put together these gospel stories. Regardless, Jesus wanted us to dwell on the possibility of bad and tragic events, along with the presence of undisputed evil in the world. These are familiar topics all. Seminary students discuss it. Most prayer groups and *Bible* studies dwell on this, too. Some of you already know that theologians have a fancy name for this: **Theodicy**. Briefly explained, it means that bad things really do happen to really **good people**.

Well, you and I are not capable of “solving” these issue, and neither is anyone else for that matter. Regardless of what you and I or anyone else believes, in these verses Jesus tells us that **God is present** with those who **believe** and are seeking forgiveness. But, God is present with the sinful, as well! We can look further at this: The Galileans apparently were slain in the act of giving their **blood offerings** presumably at, or near, the temple. There are several recorded incidents about Pontius Pilate that are very similar to this. And, those killed during the construction of **the tower** were hardly prepared or deserving of death. Those killed and injured were not selected out of the crowd of workers or passersby because they were uniformly evil. In fact, Jesus points out that almost every sinful person in Jerusalem **survived** these incidents.

In this scripture, Jesus is telling us that that the world is working out to **God’s purpose**, but God is not pulling strings as if you and I were puppets. And, God is not throwing disastrous lighting bolts randomly at us poor and defenseless humans. (That image remains an unfortunate holdover from Greek and Roman mythology.) The reality is just what Jesus was describing: We human beings are weak and fairly **helpless**. We cannot survive **falling bricks** and timbers. When we are cut, **we bleed** and possibly die.

But, Jesus points out rather firmly that we should, and need to, **repent** of our sins: Not that we will become perfect and sinless. Rather, Jesus wants you and me to prepare our hearts and minds for improved and more **faithful living**, for more sincere worship and prayer, for a **giving spirit** and willing minds to consider all others as **worthy** of our attention- and **our care**.

Lent is the special time for just such preparation, prayer, study, worship, and contemplation. Where are you and I in this journey of **self-evaluation**? Where are our requests for **forgiveness**? Where and when do we **change** in order to become disciples, who serve the world though God’s love- and the power of the **Risen Christ**?

Stan Reid © 2019