



**Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush**

**March 23, 2025**

**Text: Luke 13:1-9**

### **Beyond Tragedy**

Lent can be a difficult season. It asks us to intentionally do different things: give up something, take something positive on, spend time in self-reflection, and remember this is a season that culminates with Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. It's meant to be a sobering season – one without “Alleluias”; one where we repeatedly hear the refrain to repent and turn back to the Lord. We accept that these calls for repentance are just part of the language of Lent. But it becomes harder when we hear a passage like today's reading from Luke in which Jesus is asked about two tragic events and his response is the seemingly harsh reply, “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Before we grapple with Jesus' words, we need to take a deep breath and then honestly reflect on the tragedies happening in our world today.

By definition, tragedies are bad things. They involve pain, loss, even loss of life. Sadly, we have a high tolerance for tragedy nowadays. There were just under 500 mass shootings in America last year and 21,000 homicides. But ever since Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, Robb Elementary, and the Pulse Nightclub, we seldom hear about tragic shootings in the news anymore. However, since we've broached this topic, let's organize tragedies into three categories – natural disasters, human tragedies, and willful, evil tragedies.

First, the news is full of reports about natural disasters – tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunamis, the fiery destruction of huge swaths of Los Angeles, the flooding and devastation from Hurricane Helene in the Carolinas. I see the reports of these disasters and it causes me to wonder: If my house was burning, what would I grab and take with me? If there was no electricity, no running water, no internet, could I survive? Lots of people wonder about these things. About 20 million Americans identify as “preppers.” Preppers are people who are taking steps now to be prepared should disaster strike. They're stockpiling food, candles, flashlights, batteries, matches, blankets, first aid, always having a full tank of gas and extra cash in the house, things like that. You can be a Prepper if you wish, but it's important to remember that nature isn't out to get you. We have made and keep making choices that put ourselves at risk from natural events. Nature isn't the problem here; thinking we can live indifferent to nature, bad weather, fires and earthquakes – that's the problem.

Second, there are human tragedies. Bad things happen. Things fall down, bridges collapse, mistakes are made with tragic consequences. All of us have stories about these things. I remember back in 1981 there was a party at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Kansas

City. The atrium had open balconies on several floors on which people were dancing, while far below them was the crowded bar area and the central courtyard. Suddenly two concrete balconies collapsed and crashed to the ground, killing 114 people and wounding another 200 more. I was home in Kansas City that summer, and just about everyone I knew, knew someone hurt or killed in that tragedy. Human error, the lack of washers on key bolts, shoddy workmanship. Reasons were given; lawsuits were filed; funerals were organized; but the tragedy never goes away.

A group came to Jesus, asking about a tower in the city of Siloam that had collapsed and taken 18 lives. Were the victims' deaths justified? Jesus was quick to say, "No, those who died were no different from everyone in the land." Jesus did say something more – but in that initial response, he reminds us not to look away from tragedies trying to find an answer somewhere other than right before our eyes. The tower in Siloam collapsed because it wasn't strong – perhaps bad materials or bad design. The walkways in Kansas City collapsed because of construction shortcuts, design mistakes, too many people on something unable to support them. All human tragedies are gut-wrenching and painful, yet our fingerprints remain all over them no matter how much we try to find someone else to blame.

Human-based tragedies don't just happen to buildings; they also inflict damage on neighborhoods and communities. I'm reminded of a book written in 2016 by the man who is now governor of the state of Maryland. It's called "The Other Wes Moore." It's about two kids both named Wes Moore who were born blocks apart within a year of each other. Both grew up without fathers in similar Baltimore neighborhoods. Both hung out on street corners and got into trouble with the police. But one became a Rhodes Scholar, a decorated veteran, a business leader, and now state governor, while the other ended up a convicted murderer serving a life sentence behind bars. Governor Moore's book describes the real challenges facing kids in our world today. But at one point he says this: "The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his."

Natural disasters. Human-made tragedies. The third category is most troubling, something I'll call "tragic acts of evil." The crowd that confronted Jesus that day started by asking him about an act of intentional evil – an incident in which Pontius Pilate had a group of Galileans murdered in the temple, so that their blood literally mingled with the blood of the sacrificial animals. History doesn't tell us about a specific event in which Pilate had Jews murdered in the temple, but there's no reason to doubt the bible's testimony. Again, the crowd wonders if these victims had somehow earned their fate, to which Jesus gives a definite "No" reply.

Some things are simply wrong to do. Murdering innocents is wrong, whether that involved Pilate long ago or Israel's resumption of bombing raids in Gaza taking innocent lives right now. Starving people is wrong, whether it was the senseless

slaughter of buffalo herds necessary for survival by the Native Americans two centuries ago, or the halting of humanitarian aid of food and medicine to vulnerable children by the shutting down of U.S.A.I.D. programs one month ago. Here again Jesus does not blame the tragic victims of human acts of evil, as if they were somehow at fault. But in his response, Jesus does follow up by twice saying, "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

The temptation here is to skip over Jesus' words and jump to the end of the passage. It's a parable about a fig tree that for three years has not produced any fruit for its owner. Assuming we are like the unproductive tree - that we fail to produce the fruit of justice and good works as God intends - we too might be the recipient of an angry decree to be cut down and destroyed. But in this parable, the gardener - perhaps meant to represent Christ our Intercessor - speaks up and offers to work with us for one more year. He offers to fertilize us, to care for us, to give us another chance. That's a much more hopeful message than the gloom and doom that came before it.

But I can't get Jesus' sharp words out of my head. Two tragedies are described. Jesus is insistent that the victims are not at fault, but then twice goes on to say, "But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." In effect Jesus refuses to get distracted by the examples of tragedy told to him and wants his listeners to stay focused on the big picture. Yes, in this life there are natural disasters. There are horrible accidents caused by human sin and incompetence. And there are utterly unacceptable acts of evil caused by tyrants, fools, and leaders willing to sacrifice others just to stay in power. But Jesus came to us to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom of God - and nothing would distract him from that message. He wanted his followers to be aware of tragedy, while also being able to look beyond tragedy itself.

This idea was described by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. He said that as people of faith, we know that human history is full of tragedy. Evil is all around us and even our best efforts to do what is right are marred by human weakness, fallibility, and sin. But God's "Yes" is still stronger than every "No" ever uttered in this life. God's goodness has dominion over all life, even the parts that are sinful and bad. Because of Christ, we can look "beyond tragedy" and know in our hearts that life is not hopeless.

If that sounds too abstract, here is another way to think about it. It comes from a funeral prayer supposedly written by William Penn long ago. It says this: *We give them back to thee, O Lord, who gave them to us. Yet as Thou did not lose them in giving, so we have not lost them by their return...For what is Thine is ours also if we are thine. And life is eternal and love is immortal, and death is only a horizon - and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. So lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further. Cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly. Draw us closer to thyself so that we may know ourselves to be near to our loved ones who are with thee.*

In this life, tragedies will be ever before us. Towers collapse, violence occurs in temples, evil strikes down the innocent. Most days we wonder how much more we can take. Jesus does offer an answer. He calls us to see the tragic clearly and honestly and to repent of whatever wrong played a part in the tragedy. Christ wants us to strive to do better, and to act with compassion and justice in all things. But Jesus also challenges us to look further, to look beyond tragedy, to know that our horizons are simply the limits of our earthly sight and understanding. That is why Jesus also promises to lift us up so we might see further. He gives us more time to bear good fruit. He wants us to move through Lent as people of faith who see beyond the cross to the promise of an empty garden tomb and the assurance of life everlasting. May it be so.