

## SUFFERING AND SIN (Luke 13:1-9)

On November 1, 1755, All Saints Day, at 10:24 in the morning the Azores-Gibraltar Transform Fault slipped, which caused an earthquake that reduced the city of Lisbon to rubble and killed anywhere from 30,000 to 40,000 people. The death toll was so high because of the holiday. Everybody was in church and every church in the city was destroyed.

Terrible as it was, the earthquake did more than topple buildings. The tremors that leveled the city of Lisbon shook the foundations of European culture and philosophy. Immanuel Kant wrote three separate texts on the earthquake and was the first person to offer an explanation in terms of natural phenomenon instead of divine punishment. Kant theorized that earthquakes are caused when underground caverns filled with hot gases shift.

We've come a long way since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We have an entire field of science called seismology that studies earthquakes. We know they aren't caused by underground caverns filled with hot gases but happen when tectonic plates slip. And if seismologists can't predict exactly when earthquakes are going to happen, at least they know where they're likely to happen. Maybe someday they'll be able to say *when* and not just *whether* and avoid the kind of devastation we've seen in Haiti and Chile.

On a more philosophical note, Voltaire made satirical use of the Lisbon earthquake in his novella *Candide* and wrote a long philosophical *Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake*.

. We've come a long way since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But when a natural disaster strikes, all the scientific explanations in the world don't keep us from asking pretty much the same philosophical and theological questions that perplexed Europeans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Jews back in Jesus' day: Why did this happen? Or more pointedly, why did God let this happen? Here's how Voltaire put the question in his *Poem*:

The universe confutes your boasting vain,  
Your heart retracts the error you maintain.  
Men, beasts, and elements know no repose  
From dire contention; earth's the seat of woes;  
We strive in vain its secret source to find.  
Is ill the gift of our Creator kind?

It seems every disaster brings out a certain group that want to blame the victims. "If they weren't a bunch of sinners, this wouldn't have happened to them!" When Jesus' disciples met a man born blind, they asked who sinned – him or his parents. They couldn't imagine any other explanation. Jesus confronts the same assumption in the questions he asks in today's lesson: Were the Galileans Pilate killed worse sinners than those who weren't? Some thought so. Were the people crushed by the falling tower the only wicked people in Jerusalem? Some thought so.

But Jesus refutes that assumption when he answers his own question: Of course not! But Jesus knows that's how people think. We want to believe the universe makes sense, we need to trust that there's a reason, we yearn for some assurance that it's not all simply random.

I don't often quote Adolf Hitler, but I'm going to this morning. In his autobiographical *Mein Kampf* Hitler coined the term "big lie," which is a lie so "colossal" that no one would believe that someone "could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously." Hitler used the big lie as a propaganda tool. Tell a lie that's big enough and tell it often enough, and loud enough, and eventually people will believe it, even if it's absolute baloney.

Hitler was a master of the big lie. But he wasn't its only practitioner. We don't have to look too far to find examples today. Just listen to talk radio. The point I want to make, though, is that there are big lies in theology as well as politics.

One of those big lies is that God sends natural disasters or disease or terrorists attacks to punish us for our sin. That lie has been told and it's been told often – and yes, people believe it. Certain prominent "religious leaders" (and I use that term advisedly) can be counted on to trot it out any time a disaster strikes. That's Pat Robertson's standard explanation. He used it after the 9/11 attacks, he used it after Hurricane Katrina, and he used it after the earthquake in Haiti.

According to Pat Robertson, all of Haiti's troubles go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the French still ruled that country. The Haitians swore a pact with the devil that they would serve him if he helped them get free of the French. The Haitians got their wish, the French are gone, and the devil's been collecting on the deal ever since, cursing Haiti with one disaster after another, piling misery on top of misery. At least that's Pat Robertson's take on the tragic history of Haiti. Mercifully, he hasn't said anything about the earthquake in Chile.

It's pretty sad to realize how many people are influenced by that kind of bad theology. Granted, Pat Robertson in some ways is too easy a target because with him it's just a knee-jerk reaction. "Because they're all sinners" or "because they made a deal with the devil" is his answer. It doesn't require any thought or analysis.

Bill Leonard, the dean of Wake Forest Divinity School calls simplistic answers like that "a mistaken effort to sound prophetic." It's mistaken for several reasons: first, because it automatically blames the victim and, second, because it lumps saints in with sinners and ignores the fact that a lot of victims are completely innocent. Certainly none of the victims of the Haiti earthquake swore a pact with the devil 200 years ago. The archbishop of Haiti was killed, volunteers helping on construction projects were killed, thousands of children were killed. Are we really supposed to believe that God was somehow punishing them, too?

The real mistake in simplistic answers like that, though, is the implicit self-righteousness. "Because they're all sinners" is the kind of answer that can only be given by someone who is oblivious to his or her own sinfulness. The fact that they were punished proves that *they're* all sinners; the fact that *we* were spared

proves that *we're* okay. A far more honest answer is, "There but for the grace of God..."

Because make no mistake: grace is the other half of the story. The same Jesus who said, "Unless you repent, you will all perish," is the same Jesus who identified with victims of violence, the same Jesus who showed us a God of mercy and not of wrath, the same Jesus weeps when we weep, whose heart is broken when ours are broken, the same Jesus who walks with us through every hardship and tragedy, even when the path leads to the cross.