



“Course Correction”
Scripture – Luke 13:1-9
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 24, 2019

I suspect you have toyed with this game before, but I would like for us to try it together. Here it is: If you could ask God one question, what would you ask? [Why are there so many starving people in the world? Why do children get cancer? “Mosquitoes. Really? What’s the point?” Why are some people so cruel?]

Many people of faith yearn to know why people suffer in a world created by God and declared “Good.” This question was writ large in the sky just three weeks ago when devastating tornadoes ripped through Alabama killing 23 people.

According to NBC News, Cora Jones, who is 52, had already been struggling. In December, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. A few weeks later, she lost her job. Her family, who lived a few streets away, rallied to support her. So after church on Sunday, March 3rd, Cora planned to go to her parents’ house to prepare a meal that included her mother’s favorite: sweet potatoes. It was going to be a nice evening together as a family.

Instead, shortly after everyone returned home from church, deadly tornadoes sliced through their small town. Cora raced to her parents’ house after the twisters hit, hoping to find them alive but when she reached the top of the hill, she could not spot a single house. Winds of 170 miles per hour had reduced everything to rubble.

Searching through the debris, she found her father’s body. Later, emergency personnel confirmed her mother’s death.

That was not all. A total of 10 members of her family were killed, including a brother, a cousin, and a niece.

She said, “I just have so many questions...Why, you know, why? Why did this have to happen like this? To everybody that you know and love? At one time? Why?”¹

That’s the question we so often ask when suffering strikes. Why? And it is the heavy question hovering over today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke. In Jesus’ day, many believed that when tragedy struck it was because people deserve it. They clung to a tidy formula: sinners are punished, good people are rewarded.

It is not quite clear from our passage if some in the crowd believed this or they were struggling with the too simple equation. Either way, they wanted to hear Jesus’ take on suffering.

Some in the crowd tell Jesus that a group of men from Galilee were in the temple making their sacrifices, when Pilate's henchmen executed them on the spot. Luke hints at a gruesome scene, saying that the men's blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.

Jesus knew why they presented him with this case. Did these men have it coming to them?

Jesus says, "Do you think these Galileans suffered this way because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you."

Then Jesus provides his own example of human suffering. "Eighteen 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."

While Jesus does not provide a thorough answer to why people suffer, he does not believe that those murdered by Pilate or those crushed by the collapsing tower were the preeminent sinners in the land. Beware of thinking that all suffering is deserved.

The notion that the people who suffered were being punished is especially troubling because those unaffected by the tragedies were blaming the victims for their demise. Jesus says "No," to such thin theology.

The response of Jesus also swats away the notion that we can reasonably account for all suffering. The people killed by the tower collapse were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Kate Bowler wrote of the reactions of others after she was diagnosed with cancer. Nearly everyone believes there is a reason she has it. She says, "They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos."²

I can imagine people peppering her with questions. Did you smoke? Did you ever live in an area with high cancer rates? Were you exposed to pesticides? Lead in the water? Too much radiation? How about asbestos?

Many yearn to nail down a clear reason for another's cancer to reassure themselves that they are not a candidate. Others live with a dark certainty that sooner or later they will be given the same dreaded diagnosis.

When disaster strikes, we hunt for logical explanations. We yearn to make sense of suffering. It does not sit well to think that sometimes stuff just happens. We long to nail down a reason, rather than acknowledging that there are things beyond our control that wreak havoc. What happens in life does not always make sense. And it is not always fair. We and our loved ones are vulnerable.

Yet, Jesus does not want his followers left thinking that all suffering is random. Certainly if we place ourselves in precarious situations we will likely run into trouble at some point. While sin was neither the reason for the death of the Galileans, nor those killed by the tower, Jesus says "Unless you repent, you will perish." Is Jesus trying to have it both ways? Is he saying that in the two examples the people did not die as a result of their sinfulness, BUT unless you quit sinning, you will perish as they did?

He is not. Remember that the core meaning of repent is not to think poorly of yourself, but rather "to turn in a new direction." Jesus is saying, "If you are hell-bent on the path heading toward death, you need to make a serious course correction and turn toward life. And not only do we need to turn toward life, but we need to do it now. Life is passing. Our time may be shorter than we think."

Still, if Jesus left them with "Unless you repent, you will perish," it would be natural for them to conclude that God is like a judge ready to pronounce the death sentence. So to insure they understand him correctly, he tells a

parable about a fig tree. The man who owned the land came to the tree looking for fruit on it, but it bore nothing. So, the man said to his gardener, “Cut it down. It’s useless. It’s merely occupying space.” But the gardener replied, “Let’s give it one more year. I will dig around it and fertilize it, and maybe it will produce. If not, you can cut it down.”

Rather than a harsh judge, God is like a gardener who takes extra measures to tend to his tree, providing it with opportunities to bear fruit. Thus, we are called to repent to avoid a barren existence and to embrace a fruitful life.

Martin Gray, who survived the Warsaw Ghetto and the Holocaust, wrote about his life in a book called *For Those I Loved*. He tells how, after the Holocaust, he rebuilt his life, married, and raised a family. Life was wonderful after the horrors of the concentration camp. Then one day, his wife and children were killed when a forest fire ravaged their home in the south of France. Gray was distraught and pushed almost to the breaking point. People urged him to demand an inquiry into what caused the fire, but instead he chose to put his resources into a movement to protect nature from future fires. He explained that an investigation would focus only on the past, on issues of pain and sorrow and blame. He wanted to focus on the future.

An inquiry would set him against other people – Was someone negligent? Whose fault was it? – and working against other people, setting out to find a villain, accusing other people of being responsible for your misery, only makes a lonely person lonelier. Life, he concluded, has to be lived *for* something, not merely *against* something. Rather than focusing on the past and on the pain – “why did this happen to me?” – We must ask instead: “Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?”³

When the charcoal panther of suffering stalks your every thought,
swallowing every ray of light that attempts to enter your soul;

When its claws hunker heavy on your chest,
preventing you from rising off the basement of your being;

When the “Why?” gradually devours your will
and despair takes up residence in your bones;

You may wail at the beast dragging you across the intersection of innocence
you prayed to avoid.

But denouncing the predator that created your purgatory
will not finally chase away the torment in your soul.

To liberate yourself from your captor
you must allow a fresh purpose to emerge.

Only then will you subdue your enemy
and discover the new future that awaits you.

NOTES

1. Gabe Gutierrez and Elizabeth Chuck, “She lost 10 family members in Alabama tornadoes,” NBC Report, March 6, 2019.
2. Eric D. Barreto, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *The Christian Century*, February 27, 2019, p.19.
3. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), p. 136-137.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of the Cross and the Empty Tomb,

Long ago you entered into our broken world that we might know the height and depth and breadth of your love for us. You – the Word-made-Flesh – touched the flesh of lepers and heeded the cries of the hungry; you wept at the tomb of Lazarus and pondered death in the darkness of Gethsemane; you began your life as a refugee and ended your life upon a Roman cross. You are no stranger to suffering, O God. So we know that you are present in the midst of illness, of sorrow, of uncertainty, of pain, of turmoil, of injustice ...

God-with-Us – Our hearts are heavy as we remember sisters and brothers throughout the world who are suffering this day:

The people of Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, who have lost lives and livelihoods to the swirling chaos of Cyclone Idai, and — now — face the realities of displacement, disease, and destabilization within already vulnerable populations;

The people of the Midwest in the midst of torrential floods and of Alabama in the aftermath of a deadly tornado – disasters that have swept away crops and homes and devastated communities;

The people of the Netherlands, whose sense of security has been shattered by a senseless act of violence, which has stolen three precious lives;

The people of New Zealand, as they bury the bodies of your beloved children, as they mourn fifty lives lost to hatred, bigotry, and fear;

The people known to us, and the people known only to you, who are facing difficult diagnoses, grieving broken relationships, or struggling to navigate life after the death of one held dear.

Surround these sisters and brothers with comfort, fill them with peace, and strengthen them in hope during these times of trial.

Sustain the first responders, the aide workers, the medical professionals, the counselors, the listeners, the family and friends, who give themselves to these people's care.

And help us, O God, to respond to the suffering we see by being a more compassionate presence in our own communities. Give us empathy when we encounter neighbors in need; give us courage to work for societies that affirm the dignity of all; and give us grace, that we might be instruments of healing and hope in this weary world.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ — the One who suffers with us *and* who promises that, one day, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Hear us now as we offer the words Christ taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.