

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2011

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 320, 238:1, 351, 325, 46

Lessons: Exodus 3:1-15, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Matthew 3:12-17.

Sermon Text: Luke 13:1-9

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

People often assume that disasters, suffering, and other terrible things that happen on earth happen because those they happen to are especially wicked. We know that disasters and other terrible things also happen to believers in Christ. But it is especially troubling when people claiming to be Christians, and even Christian ministers, make such applications to disasters. More than 200,000 people died in an earthquake in Haiti in January, 2010. CBS News reported on January 14, 2010, that on his Christian Broadcasting Network show, Pat Robertson said that the nation of Haiti has been devastated by a large earthquake because its people "made a pact with the devil." "Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it," Robertson said. "They were under the heel of the French ... and they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, 'We will serve you if you'll get us free from the French.'" "True story," he continued. "And the devil said, 'OK, it's a deal.' Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after another." *

Earthquakes, other disasters, murders, other crimes, and all sorts of horrible things and suffering happen in the world regularly. Does God really punish some people on earth because they are more wicked than others? Listen to what the Word of God really has to say about such events:

**GOD DOES NOT PUNISH ANYONE HERE ON EARTH
BECAUSE THEY ARE WORSE SINNERS THAN ANYONE ELSE.**

1. **Earthly disasters must be properly interpreted in view of God's great love for sinners.**
2. **God desires repentance but his patience eventually comes to an end, as we see in the parable of the fig tree.**

Some think that Jesus' hearers told him this event to let him know that they were aware of how God does indeed punish sinners. Jesus spoke these words to correctly interpret the event they told him about, and he adds another current event to show that God does not punish anyone because they are worse sinners than others. Many were obviously of the opinion that there was a direct connection between the greatness of the transgression and the severity of the punishment.

Some of the people with Jesus gave him an interesting piece of news which they had received from Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, had punished some Galileans. This heathen governor had polluted the Temple of God with human blood. The incident is not related by the secular historian Josephus, but fits in well with the character of the Galileans and with the disposition of Pilate. Josephus pictures Pilate as a cruel official and tells of similar violence. Historians tell us that the Galileans were a people who stubbornly resisted control under the Roman rulers and were strongly inclined to sedition and rebellion. And Pilate apparently had to show that he had control of the Jewish people. The reference seems to be to a group of worshipers at the temple offering sacrifices who were killed by Pilate's soldiers. Perhaps there had been some kind of a demonstration in the Temple which threatened to become a riot, and Pilate had promptly dispatched some soldiers and executed speedy punishment. Some think that this incident caused the enmity between Pilate and Herod, which was not resolved until the trial of Jesus when we read in Luke 23:12 "*That day Herod and Pilate became friends--before this they had been enemies.*"

The people asking the question implied that such a sudden death in the midst of so sacred a place must be regarded as a special proof of the wrath of God upon those who were killed.

Jesus asks the crowd if those who were killed were worse sinners than those who were not killed, and then he plainly rejects this wrong conclusion. The slain Galileans were not sinners who were much, much worse sinners than other Galileans. He goes on to ask them about another event. The tower of Siloam was near the pool of Siloam, in the southeast corner of Jerusalem. Only Luke records this accident. Eighteen persons were killed by the collapse of a tower at Siloam. We don't know any more details except that 18 people died when the tower collapsed.

He asks if these 18 were more guilty than all other sinners living in Jerusalem at that time. Once again he rejects this wrong conclusion. Very emphatically Jesus says, in either case: Not at all, I tell you. Jesus breaks any connection between these tragic deaths and punishment for sin. It was wrong to suppose that these were guilty sinners greater than all the people that lived at Jerusalem.

Everyone, including His hearers, is equally guilty of sin, and a like fate might befall them at any time. Unless they repented, they all might perish and be destroyed in the same way.

We must not interpret unusual earthly suffering and death as a specific punishment for some sin which an individual has committed, unless there is proof. The Lord says that those casualties are not due to the unusual wickedness of those people. His warning is to the whole nation – and to all people – who are as guilty as the few.

Jesus provides the proper interpretation of these two events: ***“unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*** Brutal murders, shocking accidents, deaths or suffering in whatever form all preach God's law: the soul that sins will die. The fear of earthly death and the sudden death of others is one way God calls people to repentance lest they perish eternally. Some falsely conclude that if nothing really bad happens to them in life, it is a sign that they have been living good lives.

There is a great danger of self-righteousness here. It is easy to think that 'I am not as bad or wicked as others.' We must remember that ***"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"*** Romans 3:23 and ***"All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one."*** Psalm 14:3

Jesus is teaching that not only certain very wicked people need to repent, but that repentance is necessary for everyone.

All suffering in the world is the result of sin. The Lutheran theologian Paul E. Kretzmann, who wrote in the 20th century, writes "In the case of believers suffering of every kind is chastisement at the hands of the Father, who punishes in time that we may be spared in eternity. If a Christian is struck by misfortune, he will not use the word 'trial' in order to justify himself. Rather will he say, in true humility, that his many sins have merited far greater and more severe punishment, and will never ask the question with regard to his own crosses or those of others, Wherewith have I earned this? But above all, one thing must never be done, and that is to argue from the severity of the suffering, drawing conclusions as to the greatness of the guilt".

So we hear from Jesus himself that disasters and other horrible things that happen to people on earth do not happen because they are more wicked than other people. Such disasters and sudden deaths are surely a reminder that God is guiding all things, and that our time on earth is limited – only God knows the moment of our death. Thus we must repent and be ready at any time to 'meet our God'. The parable in our text about the fig tree brings out the truth that God gives people time to repent. God is very patient, as we read in 2 Peter 3:9-10: ***"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."***

However the delay in judgment should not cause anyone to put off repentance. The time will finally come when the unfruitful tree is cut down. The opportunity for repentance does finally come to an end.

In Jesus' parable, a certain man, wealthy enough to have someone to take care of his vineyard, had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard, in good soil, from which he naturally expected fruit. He waited for some time, but finally he complained to the gardener in charge of the vineyard. The fig-tree was supposed to bear fruit three

times a year, and after three years the owner had not yet found a single fig on it. It seemed useless to waste any more time and work on its cultivation. It ought to be chopped down, since it interfered with, and spoiled the ground for more productive fruit-trees. The master no longer felt like coming and coming again, and always being disappointed. But the caretaker interceded for the tree. He begged for only one more year of grace, in which he intended to try with all his skill and knowledge to help the tree bring forth fruit. He would cultivate the soil around the roots, put fertilizer into the ground and in this way there might be some chances of coaxing the tree to bear fruit. But if not, then the doom of the tree is sealed, and the master will then destroy the tree.

First of all, we may look at the unfruitful fig-tree as a picture or symbol of the Jewish people. During the entire time of the Old Testament the Lord had vainly looked for fruit appropriate to the amount of labor and the gifts which He had put into the vineyard of His Church. Israel had received a rich measure of grace, but had not reacted by bringing forth the desired fruits of faith. It was like the unfruitful vineyard of which the Lord complained in our Old Testament lesson. The last year, for which the love of the vinedresser, Jesus, pleaded, was the time of mercy which had dawned with the ministry of John the Baptist, had burst into full brightness with the preaching of Jesus, and would continue during the ministry of the apostles. Here the vinedresser wanted to dig around and fertilize the fig-tree with the evidences of God's great love, of His holy zeal, and finally, through His servants, by the preaching of Jesus' suffering and death, of His resurrection and sitting at the right hand of Power. But the extra time of grace went by, the people of Israel as a whole brought no fruits suitable for repentance; and so finally the judgment of God was carried out upon the disobedient people: Jerusalem was destroyed (about 40 years after the death of Jesus) and the Jewish nation by and large was rejected.

Then, too, there is a lesson here for all times, for God deals with all men in a similar way. His justice is tempered with patience; He waits long before He condemns. But there is no assurance that we will have another day of grace, let alone another year. The mercy and love on the part of Jesus succeeds often in extending the time of grace for a person. But finally the most loving patience must come to an end and justice must be carried out.

Every time we hear of a disaster, a murder, suffering, or some other such horrible thing happening to shorten the lives of people on earth, may we be reminded that God's time of grace for each human will not endure forever. May we who have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ repent daily and bring forth fruits of faith unto eternal life!

1. With broken heart and contrite sigh,
A trembling sinner, Lord, I cry.
Thy pardoning grace is rich and free,--
O God, be merciful to me!
2. I smite upon my troubled breast,
With deep and conscious guilt opprest:
Christ and His cross my only plea,--
O God, be merciful to me!
3. Far off I stand with tearful eyes
Nor dare uplift them to the skies;
But Thou dost all my anguish see,--
O God, be merciful to me!
4. Nor alms nor deeds that I have done
Can for a single sin atone.
To Calvary alone I flee,--
O God, be merciful to me!
5. And when, redeemed from sin and hell,
With all the ransomed throng I dwell,
My raptured song shall ever be,
O God, be merciful to me! Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal 323)

* <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2010/01/14/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry6096806.shtml>