

March 23, 2025
Third Sunday in Lent

“The Bad of the World”

Luke 13:1-9

“There were some present at that very time who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?’”

Something to note that you might overlook in this reading: Jesus does not say that the Galileans who Pilate killed or the folks who had the tower in Siloam fall on them were not suffering punishment for their sins. In fact, He kind of assumes that’s the case. His point isn’t to say bad things happening to people isn’t judgment for sins. His point is that people would see that judgment and repent of sins: *“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*

God punishes sin. Judgment happens. Every nasty, evil thing that happens in this world is the result of sin, a result of that sin which destroyed paradise and corrupted creation to the core, and us right along with it. It is not wrong to see every bad thing that happens, including earthly death, as a judgment for sin. I don’t think you can look at every bad thing that happens and correlate that with a certain sin committed, Jesus seems to make that plain also. But it’s all part and parcel of the curse that came with the Fall. It’s God’s wrath on all of sinful mankind.

In my experience it seems we Christians tend not to think this way...and from one perspective we are absolutely correct in that. Christ on His cross paid the full penalty for sin. Baptized into Him, by grace through faith we stand declared righteous—no judgment of condemnation for us!

Yet judgment as in the consequences of sin is all around us everyday having its way with us in this world. And Jesus is here saying that it is something we should recognize and that it should alarm us, prompting us to take action in the repentance that includes sorrow over our sins that deserve such judgment, desperation because we know we are powerless to atone for them but also faith and trust in the one who is eager to grant us forgiveness and release from them.

The Gospel good news is right in the middle of all this, of course, in the Son of Man, the Messiah who is delivering not just warning, but invitation to turn, repent and be pardoned by God’s grace. The parable He tells highlights this warning and invitation.

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

In the immediate context I think this story is referencing the vineyard as the world and the fig tree as Israel, God’s chosen people in the world. God has been calling them to repentant faith in Him for centuries. We heard it from the prophet Ezekiel in our Old Testament lesson: *“As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O*

house of Israel?” We heard Jesus state their response last week, “*And you would not!*” They haven’t bore fruit. They deserve to be cut down.

Yet God is merciful. More time, fertilizer for the fig tree—the hope it will bear fruit. Jesus comes as Messiah. After His death, resurrection and ascension the Gospel will be proclaimed in Jerusalem first—the hope Israel will bear fruit. It won’t...at least among most of the Jews. Jerusalem will be destroyed in the year 70 AD. That’s its judgment.

But the parable carries forward into the church unto a world of Gentiles through centuries. The gracious call of Christ is constant: “*Repent and believe in the Gospel.*”

Yes indeed, we stand baptized into Christ Jesus, wrapped in His righteousness in which we can face the day of judgment without fear. But the faith we live is a life of this repentance to which we are called. It’s an everyday thing; not a one and done thing.

We’ve got to beware of the temptation to get this all backward and upside down. We tend to see the world as the good and best thing that we fear losing. We see the bad things happening and think they’re messing up a world that should be good to us. We don’t see such things as judgment upon a dying world; we see them as glitches in the system that, if we could only be done with them, then we could enjoy the good life now. Rather than repent and turn from the world and toward the mercy of Christ we are tempted to embrace the world even more, as if it is the precious thing we fear losing.

But all that evil, injustice, pain, suffering and decay toward death is the evidence the world stands under judgment for sin. It’s passing away. There is no future in it. Sin’s effect already takes away this life in earthly death. Holding onto the world is to embrace the second death-eternal separation from God as this world falls into the abyss under His judgment!

“*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*” Jesus isn’t making a threat here. He is issuing a warning—an explanation of the truth of how things stand. He will go from here to Jerusalem and make that which you turn toward in your repentance absolutely obvious—His atoning cross.

In Christ crucified God’s judgment is plain to see in the wounds and suffering He receives there—in our place. The world’s curse becomes Christ there as the Father’s wrath is emptied on His forsaken, innocent Son. In Him we see the horrible inheritance of all who cling to the fallen world rather than release their sins to Him in faith that He would condemn them in His grave.

So the parable is for us also. It seems real strange to put it this way, but the Gospel is manure for all of us fruitless fig trees. The Holy Spirit works through that Word that we might daily produce the fruit of repentance in faith. The Father longs for us to be saved as His beloved children. He is loving and patient, calling to us this moment to live in the One He sent to save us, turn toward the cross and not perish, but live.

So when the bad of the world does what it does, let it remind you that it is because it stands under judgment. Yes it’s bad and it hurts and it’s wrong and we know things just shouldn’t be this way—but that’s because sin ruined it and it stands cursed.

Let that reality drive you to that which is the answer to the curse—repentance unto the Savior who has born that curse, risen in victory and glory beyond it, and daily invites you into the same—and guarantees it by His Word and Sacraments.

In Him then, walk joyfully through this world under judgment, know that judgment is never on you.

Amen.