

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022

The Lessons: Ezekiel 33:7-20
 Psalm 85
 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
 Luke 13:1-9

The Hymns: # 824 *May God Bestow on Us His Grace*
 # 764 *When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love*
 # 761 *Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me*

The Collect: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reign with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Good and Evil
 The Third Sunday in Lent
 Luke 13:1–9

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today's Gospel presents us with a very hard question. This question is also important. In fact, it is so important that theologians have a special name for questions like this. Theologians call this the Question of Theodicy. The basic form of the question is, "If God is both almighty and good, why is there evil?" There are all sorts of variations on this question. For example: 1). Why do bad things happen to good people; or 2). What have I done to deserve this; or, as in today's Gospel, 3). Why did Pilate kill these men and mix their blood with their sacrifices? Jesus Himself reminded the questioners of the tower disaster in Siloam that killed eighteen.

The culture at the time of today's Gospel did **not** believe that bad things happened to good people. They thought that if catastrophe struck, it was because you had done something bad. Likewise, they thought that if fortune came your way, you had done something good. They didn't see God as a God of love, but as a God of justice. He punished evil and rewarded good.

Other cultures dealt with the Question of Theodicy in other ways. For example: the myths of the Greeks and Romans simply assumed that the gods were not good. The gods had the same weaknesses of character that humans had. Read the mythology and you will read about petty gods who were sometimes very selfish and immature. Sometimes it seems as though their supernatural powers caused them to be spoiled brats.

Jesus taught that both of these ideas were wrong. He showed that we are asking the wrong question when we ask why bad things happen to good people.

We can begin to understand the fallacy in this question if we just think about some words that you and I say over and over again in the Divine Service: “Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment.” In Divine Service Setting Three, we say: “I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment.” When we pray these words, we confess that we are not good people. In fact, we are saying that we are bad people. We deserve misery on earth and torment in eternity. Do you begin to see the fallacy of the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

We confess our sins in this way because God’s Word clearly teaches that we are sinful people. Here are just a few of the many passages that teach of our sin. [Psalm 51:5]: Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. [Romans 3:9-12]: ...all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” [Romans 3:23]: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. [1 John 1:8, 10]: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us. These are but a few of the passages that teach us that we are sinners even before our birth, which we call “Original Sin”. And we only add to our load of sin every day through our “Actual sins”.

We sometimes use theological words and forget what they really mean. When we say that we sin, we are saying that we are bad people. When the Bible tells us that all have sinned, it is saying that all people are bad. They are not good. Now, do you see why the question “Why do bad things happen to good people,” is not helpful or useful?

When we ask the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people,” we are assuming that there are good people out there somewhere. The Bible clearly teaches that there are no good people. In our confession of sin, we clearly confess that we deserve bad things now and forever because we are bad people. So, the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people,” is not a question about real people. We have no clue what would happen to good people because there are no good people.

Since we confess that we are bad people and deserve both present and eternal punishment, we should be very, very afraid to ask why God does not take evil out of the world. If God were to take all evil out of the world, He would have to start with you ... and me. We are the sinners. While the devil and his evil angels are the ultimate source of evil, we humans are a great source of evil in this world. We should ask, “If God is both almighty and good, why doesn’t He destroy us for being so evil,” or, “Why do good things **ever** happen to us sinners?”

We have confessed that we deserve a bad day every day and yet, surprisingly, that is not what happens. Our normal days are actually pretty good. For one thing, we wake up. If you think back through your life from birth until now, most of our days are pain free. Although we get sick from time to time, there are many more days when we are not sick. Once in a while, we put the key in the ignition and the car won’t start. Most of the time, it starts just fine. Think back through your life. Yes, there have been some life changing tragedies, but for the most part, we have to admit that life has been pretty good. We can be very thankful that, although God is almighty, and He is good, He is also merciful. His justice demands punishment of evil, but He has worked out a way to punish evil without punishing us.

You see, while the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people,” is useless, the question, “Why did all those bad things happen to the one and only good person,” is very, very useful. There actually was and is only one good person. That person is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God’s answer to the question of evil in the world. That is because Jesus Christ is both God and man in one person.

Many bad and horrible things happened to Jesus. He was beaten, flogged, and crucified, but those were not the worst things. In a transaction that we cannot even begin to understand, Jesus cried out, [Matthew 27:46] “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” From these words, we learn that all the bad days that we deserved and all the eternal punishment what should belong to us came down on Jesus as He hung on that cross. In suffering that we can’t even begin to understand, God the Father forsook God the Son. These are the bad things that happened to the one and only good person, Jesus Christ. This is what the almighty, good, just, merciful, and loving God did in order to deal with evil. He sacrificed Himself in order to show mercy to evil sinners.

Jesus Christ did not remain dead, but He returned to life. He now offers the forgiveness of sin to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. He and God the Father send the Holy Spirit to work repentance and the forgiveness of sins in us. The Holy Spirit works these things in us through faith in Jesus Christ, the one and only good person who was crucified and lives again.

Jesus Christ continues to intercede for us before God as the Holy Spirit inspired John to write, [1 John 2:1] “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Jesus illustrated that intercession with a parable. Just as the gardener interceded for the fig tree with the owner, so Christ intercedes with God’s justice on our behalf. Jesus intercedes for patience while the Holy Spirit works on us. God is looking for the fruit of repentance in us.

Jesus intercedes, but there is a limit. Two times, Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” There is a limit to the amount of time God allows for the fruit of repentance to form. There comes a day when it is our turn to leave this world. Those who grieve for their sin, but rejoice in the forgiveness earned for them by the one and only God man, Jesus Christ will live in eternity with the good man who loved them enough to suffer for them. Those who do not show the fruit of repentance will join the devil and the evil angels as they suffer forever in hell. Jesus illustrates this in the parable with these words: “If [the tree] should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

There is one and only one good man, Jesus Christ. The rest of us are all bad. Jesus Christ, the one and only good man suffered the punishment you deserved for your sin. Through that suffering, He earned the forgiveness of sins for you. You and I are sinners, it is true. But we are, by Christ’s sacrifice, redeemed sinners. When through weakness or through deliberate willfulness, you give in to sin, I call upon you to repent. Turn from your sins. Confess them.

And then believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. As the gardener fertilizes the fig tree so it will produce good fruit, so Christ has spread the manure of his mercy in your life. He has not cut you down as you deserve because of your sins. Instead, he has given you the possibility of new growth and fruitfulness – a life of good works.

May the rich fertilizer of Christ’s work of redemption fill your life with joy and fruitfulness for your Savior. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.