

Luke 13:1-9

why is God so patient with us?

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Can we all agree this is a difficult text? Agreed. So I want to return to the two questions that I mentioned the other week about approaching scripture. Why is this story here? What does this story say about God?

A ruthless tyrant slaughters people and mocks their religion. It's a shocking display of evil. (Sound familiar?) A tower collapses and the people die in a heart-breaking second. (When the crane fell in New York City, you could hear the gasp of grief unbridled.)

Tragedy has a way of stripping away and making clear what is most important. We know this from private and public experiences.

A black boy playing alone in a park foolishly points his squirt gun at anxious, misinformed police; in an instant Tamir is dead, officers Timothy and Frank are stricken and a community is engulfed in rage and grief. Tornadoes suddenly and swiftly blow away entire communities including the churches within them. A pastor in Georgia stands in the ruins of his sanctuary getting ready for an unexpected open-air worship service. He says, "We got nothing. But we have each other and we have God with us. So we'll go on alright even if we don't know how, yet."

Tragedy strips away everything but something else happens. Questions arise. Why me? Why not me? When people come to Jesus he anticipates these deeper unspoken questions. Do bad things happen to certain people simply because they are more wicked than the rest of us? Some people think so.

A hurricane sinks New Orleans and, while frightened mothers and their children are clinging to rooftops floating in the deluge, an American pastor declares victory over homosexuals, fornicators and their liberal supporters.

The tower in the ancient town of Siloam falls unexpectedly, perhaps a violent wind topples it, or a flaw in the design; maybe a tremor causes the foundation to shift. Crash! Eighteen people are dead. Why? Were these people marked as somehow worse than anyone else in all Jerusalem?

So when the people come to Jesus, he answers the questions lurking underneath the surface. What's shocking is how he answers them.

Jesus doesn't just quickly dismiss the notion that the wickedness of the people caused the tower to fall. While you and I can make a life that is more likely to bring happiness

than hardship by the choices we make, no one can predict upon whom the rain of pain shall fall. It falls upon the just and the unjust and not in equal measure. There is no class of people slotted for punishment.

Jesus makes that much clear. But then he abruptly changes the subject from questioning others to questioning how one is going to live right now. That is where it gets bewildering.

Why does Jesus call us to repent? Didn't he just say those folks didn't die because they deserved it? So, now, if we don't change our ways, we, in fact, we deserve the death we get? What's going on here?

Perhaps Jesus is saying, tragedy can function as a spiritual wake up call. Like the man in the ICU who survives a sudden heart attack and is suddenly spilling over with gratitude for everything and everyone. When the rug is pulled out from others – I can shake my head at their loss, offer a prayer and go on my way, unaffected. Or it can be an occasion to examine my life more closely. How does a black boy shot in the park change things for me; or a journalist killed on live television; or a Syrian child washed up dead on the shore? What difference does it make to me? My life goes on and on.

Can you hear Jesus' caution?

What are the behaviors of your life that you must forsake now because they hinder or even obstruct a relationship with God, sharing with others in pursuit of the common good? What keeps you attached to a life constantly pursuing the things the prophet Isaiah said keeps you filled but your soul never satisfied with food God provides?

Why is this story here? Time doesn't run on forever in this mortal life. We only have so much time to live with God and as God intends to live with us. Jesus focuses our attention on this reality. The barren fig tree was spared that it may have more time to bear fruit. Considering the mess we are in of our own making I often wonder in amazement at God's patient loving-kindness toward us.

What then does this story tell us about God? God is not focused on punishment. God is love. God's judgment is always joined with God's mercy, toward the goal of a fruitful human life. So Fig Tree what are you waiting for?

Seriously. Isn't now the time? **God is astonishingly patient with us.**

I don't mean to be rude but Jesus did say, "Repent. For you unless you change your hearts and lives, you too will die as they did." **Isn't this just another way of saying a life away from the God who loves you is fruitless?**

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.