

## Undefeated by Misery

Luke 13:1-9 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." <sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' <sup>8</sup> " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' "

Did you hear about the shooting at the church in Sacramento at the end of February? (I hadn't until I googled it.) No doubt you've not only heard but maybe are inundated with news of the Russian-Ukrainian War. Although none of our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Ukraine have died, many have been relocated, forced to worship in different places, some have had their homes destroyed.

What runs through your mind when you hear about these things? "Awful. Just awful." Is it questions: What did they do to deserve this? Why isn't God protecting them from these atrocities? Maybe it's a little impersonal, that these are tragic events, but I don't really have a face or a name to put with it. Maybe we breathe a sigh of relief that those things are happening out there or over there, but thankfully not here. At least we are protected.

These miseries in our world are awful things that awful people do to others, and we feel powerless to stop them. I couldn't have stopped the man in Sacramento who shot 4 people in a church. I don't live there. I didn't know the man, let alone know what he was planning. Had I even been there, what could I have done? A war between two countries? I mean, I can pray. I can send relief money. I can buy and fly a Ukrainian flag. I can write to my representatives and voice what I think should be done. But in all of it, I can't make them all sit down and get along. You and I, we can feel defeated by misery.

Much like someone here at church this morning bringing up the Russian-Ukrainian War or the latest mass shooting at a church, so Jesus found himself hearing similar miseries. "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." (verse 1) We know the name Pontius Pilate because ultimately he would be the one to order the execution of Jesus on the cross. He was the Roman governor put in charge of the nation of Israel. We don't know the backstory to this event. No one could pull out their smart tablet in 30 AD to Google it. It wasn't fake news or propaganda as Jesus himself acknowledges this as an event that happened. All we know is that there were religious Jews from Galilee who were offering their sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. Pilate made the decision to execute them while they were worshiping, shedding their blood as the blood of their sacrifices was being offered. Had they done something illegal? Had they tried to run from the government? Did they deserve this? We don't know. All we know is that this tragedy happened like an active shooter opening up a hail of gun fire on people gathered around the Word of God in a church.

The news of killing of believers while they were worshiping by their government led to the reference of another misery. A tower in Siloam, a place just outside of Jerusalem with a pool that people washed in, had fallen. Without 24-7 news coverage, we're left without the details. Was it faulty construction? Was it failed upkeep? Was it advanced erosion? Was it structurally unsound due to an earthquake? We don't know. It happened, and people were crushed by it – 18 in all.

Jesus knew that these miseries were on the minds of many of the thousands of people who had gathered to hear him preach. He also knew their conclusions. He knew that people dealt with these miseries by telling themselves that only wicked, sinful people would have such miseries happen to them. Since they were not part of those Galileans who had their blood shed and mixed with their offerings and since they did not have a tower fall on them, God must approve of them. This is Karma. This is how it works. Evil people receive evil things. Good people receive good things. Their own righteousness was their source of protection from misery.

Have you found yourself also buying into the concept of Karma? Do you believe that bad things only happen to bad, wicked, sinful people? When misery strikes, is there a part of you that takes comfort thinking that you were spared because God loves you more?

How do you deal, then, when you, a faithful believer, has misery enter into your life? Do you seek around for a specific sin that you did that led to it, much like how Job's friends did when misery came to Job? And when you can't find a specific sin or action that you

took that would warrant such misery, are you now questioning God, accusing him of not treating you fairly? When God allows for a mass shooting to happen in a church or for peace to be broken and wars wage, are we defeated by these miseries?

What about the more personal miseries? It's a common tale that when someone whose loved one dies their grief leads them to resent God for dumping such misery on them. Maybe it's other miseries that lead you into a state of depression, a kind of slimy muck that you can't climb your way out of no matter how many church services you go to, no matter how many Bible passages you read, no matter how many prayers you offer. Do you feel defeated by misery?

How do you think Jesus felt hearing the story that his people were killed while worshipping God, the very people he longed to gather? How do you think it affected him to remember the tragedy at Siloam, the people there that died? Would he have thought, "Father, why didn't you prevent these things?" We don't know his inner thoughts, but we do know that he was not defeated by misery; he pressed on. As we heard last week, Jesus was determinedly going to Jerusalem to die for us. As miserable as it would be to suffer on the cross for us, he would do it for us. He faced misery to defeat misery. In this way, Jesus is undefeated by misery.

As Jesus presses on through current and impending miseries, he teaches us as to why God allows them to be dumped on us. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (verses 2-5) God does not operate on Karma. This misery dumped on these people is not their comeuppance. No, this misery is meant for you to evaluate where you stand with God, to repent of the sins you know that you have, to turn to God and find life.

Jesus then tells a parable to illustrate how God uses misery for our good. He tells about a vineyard owner and his fig tree. For three years, he had come looking for fruit from this tree – plenty of time for it to produce fruit, but he found nothing. He was fed up. This was a miserable tree, not doing what it was supposed to do. To him, it was time to cut it down.

Enter the one who took care of the vineyard. He interceded on behalf of the fig tree. " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' " (verses 8-9) He's giving the fig tree more opportunity to become fruitful by digging around it, putting fertilizer on it, and giving it more time.

Generally, the owner of the vineyard is thought to be God the Father and the one caring for the vineyard is thought to be God the Son, Jesus. The fig tree is meant to represent Israel as a people, but, honestly, that fig tree can represent every single person ever, including us. Jesus intercedes for the fig tree, for us and for all people, to give more time and attention and care.

Now, I don't want to press the details of this parable too much, but there's a connection here I hadn't seen before. The more obvious point of the parable is that God intercedes for us and gives us more time to be turned to him. But look again at the care he gives: he puts fertilizer on the fig tree, on us. What kind of fertilizer do you think people in the Middle East in Jesus' day would have used? It would have been manure, the stuff we generally flush down the toilet, insert the other words that you know that you use but that I shouldn't say from the pulpit. Yeah, he's using that. Jesus says that he's going to give you time and dump "fertilizer" on you. It smells bad, probably activates your gag reflex. God is going to give you miseries, but miseries with purpose, just like fertilizer.

Fertilizer has the nutrients needed to help a plant grow and be fruitful. God does not give us misery in our lives to pay us back for what we've done. He doesn't do Karma. He does give us misery, "fertilizer" dumped on us, so that we step back and ask, "Am I right with God?" "Do I need to repent and turn away from a sin?"

And God is also patient, letting it stay there, giving us time to be drawn to him and made stronger in our faith. He gives us today to be in his Word, to hear what he has done for us, to see that he is not deterred by misery but continues in it to the cross where he takes away our sins. Since he has already defeated misery for us, he lets those miseries sit on us so that we turn to him again and again, that we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit through the gifts of his Word, of Baptism, of the Lord's Supper. These miseries are meant to keep us close to God, the only one undefeated by misery, so that we share his victory with him.

So, for the miseries that are dumped on you, miseries that have been around for a while, remember that Jesus was undefeated by misery for you. Remember that he gives you misery as fertilizer, so that you turn away from your sin and instead turn to him, finding someone undefeated by misery for us. Our God is good to give us time and misery not so that we are defeated by it, but so that he brings us closer to him through all the fertilizer, all the miseries. With Christ, we are undefeated by misery. Amen.