

Grace mercy and peace are yours from God our Father through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Why did that earthquake hit Chile? Why did it have to destroy so much and kill so many? Or what about the one in Haiti? For that matter, why are people born with disabilities? Why does tragedy strike? Or, make it more personal. “Why did she have to die? Why does he have to suffer?” When it is your loved one you’re talking about, those “whys” are pretty intense.

“Why?” Or to phrase it another way – “It’s not fair.” Right? Isn’t that what we’re saying when we ask “why” about these things? But we are not the first. People have been asking why since things have been happening. But where the problem comes is that people have been trying to answer that question, and we haven’t always done such a great job.

A few weeks ago, I heard one pretty prominent leader of the American religious scene say that the devastation in Haiti was divine retribution for a deal they had made with the devil 200 years ago. Right after Hurricane Katrina hit, I remember hearing more than one “preacher” say or write that God destroyed New Orleans because of the sin that went on there. We’re shocked at statements like that, but really, we do the same thing when we ask, “What have I ever done to deserve this?” Or worse, when Satan convinces us we have the answer to that.

You see, really all our questions of why come back to our concept of what is fair, don’t they? I mean, so often, don’t the two statements even come together: “Why did I lose my job? ... It’s just not fair.” But in our text today, Jesus shows us that really, those bad things happening – they are fair. And more than just being fair – they have a message for us.

That message: **Repent!**

You see, our text starts with people trying to figure out what those Galileans had done that had been so bad that they had been massacred. They must have been really bad, right? Then Jesus brings it closer to home – to Jerusalem itself, that tower on corner of the pool people went to for ritual cleansing. Those 18 who died in that catastrophe must not have been very clean, huh? Really, they are all dealing with the question of “Why?” Was it fair that those people died? Was it because they had been so much worse than the others?

Well, yes – it was fair that they died – but it wasn’t a matter of being worse. Look at what Jesus says: “**Do you think they were more guilty? ...I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish!**” Do you see how he turned the question? Rather than evaluating whether *they* deserved it, he tells us to ask whether *we* deserve it. And the answer is “yes”. The only “unfair” thing in all of this is that a tower hasn’t fallen on us or *we* haven’t been massacred. You see, it is fair when bad things happen, because “bad” is the result of sin. You know the passage, “**The wages of sin is death.**” Sin in this world and in our hearts means that bad things will happen – and since we are sinners, there is no way out of that.

OK, so we’re agreed, we’ve seen bad things happen, right? So Jesus tells us we should repent, right? But how? We could define the word, right? ...A complete turnaround, literally a changing of the mind – changing from one that sees things through the sin soaked goggles of our natural reason and this world’s opinion – to one that sees things through the love of God and an understanding of his work in our world. Repent – changing your mind and mindset.

Intellectually, that sounds like a good thing to do – but realistically, how does that play out? How do we do that? Well, we talk about three parts of repentance – 1) realizing the wrong, 2) understanding our forgiveness, and then 3) the fruit – not wanting to fall back into that sin, doing the opposite of that sin. That is repentance in words. Let’s take a look at it in action.

Remember David? In Psalm 51, he described his journey of repentance. And what with adultery, murder, betrayal... he had plenty to repent about. And he did. Let me just read that for you to see the man after God’s own heart demonstrate what Jesus is talking about when he tells us to repent whenever we see something bad happen.

Psalm 51: For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. David writes: **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.** Notice he asks for forgiveness based on God’s mercy, his love, not based on our deserving it. ² **Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.** ³ **For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.** ⁴ **Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.** ⁵ **Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.** Here is the first part: He knows he was not only born sinful but he also acts sinfully. ⁶ **Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.** That’s what God wants, but of course, we fall short and we can’t give this truth, this wisdom - so David prays, knowing the one place it comes from: ⁷ **Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.** ⁸ **Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.** ⁹ **Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my**

iniquity. ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. That's what forgiveness is – all the reason for guilt and shame and sorrow are really gone and all the reason to rejoice and have a clean heart – really present. And then he moves on to the third part of this turning, this repentance: **¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. ¹⁴ Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.** With this joy in the heart, with forgiveness present – we naturally share God's truths, like our TCW team is here to do this week – and so many of you are helping with that. With this excitement of forgiveness we naturally sing God's righteousness. We shout with David – Open my lips – let me get out there where the people need to hear it and my mouth will declare your praise!

Jesus tells us to repent not just because bad things happen, but because it is so good for us, because it is the way to live. And those tragedies remind us of it. But of course, Jesus also realizes that sometimes we don't repent. We may say we're sorry, but justify ourselves in our own minds. We may say we know we're forgiven and God's children and all, but we're too busy to produce fruit.

Jesus knows that, so he tells a story, a parable. A fig tree...three years... no fruit. It should have been producing last year already – but nothing. So the owner makes a business decision. No point throwing good money after bad..."**Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"** That tree was planted for a purpose. It wasn't accomplishing it.

And a parable is an earthly story that tells us something about our relationship with God – so where do we fit here? God created us with a specific purpose – to bring him glory – and when instead we focus on ourselves, or our selfishness, or our bickering, slander, greed, or whatever it is – we are not producing the fruit of the glory of God. "Cut it down!" he should say. That would be fair. That would be right. That should be our fate.

But in jumps that vine tender, really the vine himself. Look at what he says: "**Sir...leave it alone...and I'll dig around it and fertilize it.**" Out of nowhere comes this Savior, this intercessor for the tree that deserves to be cut off. You can't help but see who he's talking about. This is the one Paul describes as being "**at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.**" Or as he says in First Timothy: "**For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.**"

The gardener speaks up, putting himself on the line. As that ax was raised, ready to come down on us for when we are unfruitful – suddenly, this Savior jumps in the way of all its piercing sharpness. Even when we don't deserve it – he did what it took to save us and to make us fruitful. As we're studying the Passion History in our Wednesday Bible studies, or if you just look around at the tragedy in this world, you've seen a small picture of the things of which that ax is capable. Jesus willingly stepped in front of the ax of punishment, the ax of those betrayals and rejections. He took the full brunt of the beatings and mocking and scourging. He let the nails pierce his hands and allowed the ax of God's law to cut off his very life, because we had earned that punishment.

And all of this – for a tree that wasn't producing fruit. Why? Because he loves us. He loves us enough to want to keep giving us that one more chance to be what he has made us. He loves us enough to prune us with those tragedies and trials, using them as tools to drive us back to him, to cut off our reliance on this world and strengthen our attachment to Him. He loves us enough to work all things for the good of His Church – for us.

And now he lets us show it. As we repent, seeing our sin, but so much more importantly, seeing our Savior – he strengthens us to act on that and complete the turn – away from sin, and toward the Son. And like the sunflower that is given power to turn its face toward the sun by that very sun – so are we given power by God's Son to turn toward him through His Word we hear, through his body and blood we eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins – he strengthens us to live for Him.

Repent! And the fruit will come. God bless it.

In Christ,
Amen.