

## Scripture Readings for March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

### Isaiah 55:1-9 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

<sup>2</sup> Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

<sup>3</sup> Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.

<sup>4</sup> See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples.

<sup>5</sup> Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.”

<sup>6</sup> Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

<sup>7</sup> Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

<sup>8</sup> “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

<sup>9</sup> “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

### 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.’”

## Sermon: Where is God in Life's Tragedies?

"Where is God in life's tragedies?" is one of those continually recurring questions. Exactly two years ago, as the original pandemic lock-down began, my first YouTube sermon from my study at home was on this very topic.<sup>1</sup> Today many people of faith are asking the same kinds of questions in the context of Ukraine. We look at the news - if we dare - and we wonder if our prayers make *any* difference and *why* God doesn't intervene or do more? We ask the same sorts of questions over our personal troubles too, whatever they may be. And as Christians seek wise responses to these complex and thorny issues, we wonder what the Bible has to say about such matters. Today's Gospel reading is a partial answer, but we also need to explore the bigger picture. At the same time, let's acknowledge that this is too big and too important a topic for a short sermon.<sup>2</sup>

Suffering, regardless of how it's caused, makes us think about the *kind* of God we believe in. And the traditional default assumption many have is that God is both all-good *and* all-powerful; he perfectly loves *and* can do whatever he wants. We take that to mean God can intervene in the world and fix *anything* he likes *when* he likes. That being the case, when we pray, we expect God to snap his fingers, say "Hey presto!" and the problem is *magically* solved. This image is of a God who is *The Great Magician* and who does the bidding of the faithful. And that last clause is significant, because *we get annoyed* when God *doesn't* answer our prayers in the way *we* would like. Perhaps we can compare this to a child having a tantrum because the parent didn't buy them the candy they wanted at the checkout aisle! What *kind* of God we believe in is therefore critically important.

This picture of God as The Great Magician is, I suggest, derived from the Old Testament view of God as an *Almighty King*. The Israelites were used to monarchs, from the ancient pharaohs of Moses' day to the rulers of the Canaanite kingdoms. They were also familiar - too familiar at times - with the local deities of the neighboring tribes. Moses and Israel's later prophets saw their God, YHWH, as the unique Creator God and as their covenant partner. Not only is God therefore greater than all the other deities, YHWH is also the only *real* god. As the Jews pray daily: "The LORD (YHWH) is our God, the LORD *alone*."<sup>3</sup> And in the bulk of the Old Testament, God was seen as the ultimate cause of *both* good and evil.<sup>4</sup> For example, in Lamentations we read: "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?"<sup>5</sup> And the assumed response is, yes, God is "in control" of *everything*. Since the writer was unwilling to blame God for his troubles, he concluded that his sin must have provoked divine judgement.<sup>6</sup> I often hear people say that God is *punishing* them with some kind of sickness or tragedy

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning John 9:1-5, see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Asking-The-Wrong-Question.pdf> .

<sup>2</sup> Suffering is the theme of: Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> The *Shema*, Deut 6:4-5.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Isa 30:19-20; 45:5-7; 46:9-11; Lam 3:37-38; Job 1:21; 2:10; 42:11.

<sup>5</sup> Lam 3:38.

<sup>6</sup> This is in-keeping with the blessing and curses of Deut 28 and the wisdom of Proverbs - and debated in Job.

for something bad they have done. This view was evident in Jesus' day too. I just *don't* believe it to be true. Allow me to try and explain why.

As we heard last week with the woman healed from her chronic orthopaedic condition,<sup>7</sup> Jesus told his audience that he had *released* her from Satan's captivity.<sup>8</sup> Luke understood that bondage, however it's caused, to be ultimately a work of the evil one and God's kingdom was all about *releasing* people from whatever binds them.<sup>9</sup> Attitudes concerning the origin of evil were therefore clearly changing in Jesus' day and at least some of our sufferings were seen to be a direct result of Satan's activity, rather than from the hand of God.<sup>10</sup> While blaming Satan may not resonate with modern scientific minds, and nor does it answer all our questions, nevertheless this alternate New Testament perspective reveals that *in their minds* God was *not* the cause of disease and poverty, and nor is he in control of events in the way some Christians today think. With that background, let's consider our Gospel reading.

You will have heard of the expression "Red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky in the morning, sailors warning."<sup>11</sup> Jesus told a similar proverb and then said, "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the weather, why don't you know how to interpret the signs of the times?"<sup>12</sup> Luke goes on to give two examples. Jesus was reminded of a time when some Galileans were visiting the temple and were offering sacrifices<sup>13</sup> when Pontius Pilate's troops entered and, perhaps fearing a riot, slaughtered them. Now, Luke's wording suggests Pilate went further and mingled their blood with the blood of their sacrifices. However, such a bold desecration would have provoked a major insurrection so it's best to take Luke's description figuratively rather than literally.<sup>14</sup> Even so, the modern equivalent of this horror is a mass shooting in a synagogue or a terrorist bomb in a worshiping church on Christmas Day.

Now the theological question Jesus addresses is whether the people who were killed was a result of *divine judgement because of their sin*. And Jesus says, "NO, they were no worse than anyone else,"<sup>15</sup> and implicit in his response is a reminder that we are all sinners.<sup>16</sup> In this case, Pilate bears responsibility for their deaths of the Galileans, not God. It's often the sin of the victimizers rather than that of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Luke 13:10-17; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-Journey-and-the-Destination.pdf> .

<sup>8</sup> See Luke 13:16.

<sup>9</sup> See also Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>10</sup> See the Parable of the Weeds in Matt 13:24–30, 36-3. (This is explicitly in the context of kingdom of God activities.)

<sup>11</sup> Jesus said the same thing in Matt 16:2-3 (often taken in the context of shepherding.); cf. Luke 12:54-55.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 12:56.

<sup>13</sup> Since laymen were allowed to perform their own Passover sacrifices, this may well have been an occasion for such an atrocity (Craig A. Evans). Passover was often a time of political unrest, since Jewish patriotic feelings ran high. The Romans concerns were, from their perspective justifiably aroused.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, there is no *extra*-biblical evidence to corroborate both incidents, but that is no reason to doubt their historicity. Pilate was known to have tried to bring Roman military emblems into Jerusalem in AD 26 (the first year of his rule). He also used money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then brutally crushed the rebellion that ensued. His troops also killed a group of Samaritans climbing their holy Mount Gerizim in AD 36, the last year of his rule. Pilate was understandably unpopular!

<sup>15</sup> Luke 13:2b. The responsibility for their deaths remains with Pilate and no one else. (See also [17].)

<sup>16</sup> In Rom 3:23, Paul also makes it clear that we are *all* sinners and subject to divine judgement.

victims that's the real issue. In the second scenario, a tower in Jerusalem, possibly a water reservoir or a defensive watchtower, collapsed and killed 18 people.<sup>17</sup> Jesus again challenges their smug piety saying the accident was *not* divinely caused and the people who were killed were no worse sinners than anyone else. Let me repeat: Jesus says, "No, they *didn't* get what they deserved," as some of his audience thought, they were - as we would say - in the wrong place at the wrong time; there's an element of randomness in who died in both incidents. Jesus' response, then, was to *not* to blame the victims *or* to blame God. And he leaves it at that and doesn't really address the "Why?" question. Rather he said such tragedies should remind us of the fragility of life.<sup>18</sup> And an untimely death is a reminder that it's a serious mistake to put off repentance. And so Jesus again calls people to respond positively to his kingdom message before it's too late, warning: "Unless you repent, you will *all* perish just as they did."<sup>19</sup>

Now when we hear the word "repent," we tend to consider it in purely spiritual terms. But the Greek word "*metanoia*" means "a U-turn in thinking that results in changed behavior," and this word can have a broader meaning than simply moral or religious transformation. The word is appropriate for a smoker who quits or for someone who switches their political allegiance from one party to another. Jesus is apparently concerned that some zealous Jews might be crazy enough to rebel against Rome and, *if* such nationalistic unrest takes root, *everyone* will suffer the consequences. He warns such people to abandon their violent ambitions and change direction - to "repent," for those who take up the sword will die by the sword. Sadly, as I mentioned last week when talking about Jesus' later lament over Jerusalem,<sup>20</sup> the people do *not* heed his call, and the city and the temple were destroyed in AD 70. Actions have consequences; Jesus says that if you fail to respond to my message of peace then you're heading toward disaster.<sup>21</sup>

Jesus underscores that message with the parable of the fruitless fig tree.<sup>22</sup> People planted such trees in vineyards because it was good for the grapes, and – more pertinently - the Old Testament often portrays Israel as a vineyard *and* as a fig tree.<sup>23</sup> It appears that God is the owner and Jesus is the gardener in this story. Yet *again* God comes to inspect his harvest and *still* finds no fruit on the tree. God's patience is wearing thin and wants to uproot the tree and plant something else that could be more productive in its place. At which point we hear the echo of John the Baptist's preaching at the beginning of Luke, saying: "Bear *fruits* worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 13:4. Siloam was a small district in Jerusalem, just south of the temple itself.

<sup>18</sup> See also John 9:1-3. (The man born blind was not a result of anyone's sin, says Jesus.)

<sup>19</sup> Luke 13:3, 5. There's an element of John the Baptist's (i.e., prophetic) judgment, and a sense of urgency here.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 13:31-35; see also [5].

<sup>21</sup> (This analysis is from N T Wright.) Note, this need not be about "hell," rather see this in the context of Luke 13:31-35.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 13:6-9 and Mark 11:13-14.

<sup>23</sup> See Mic 7:1; Isa 5:1-7; Jer 8:13; Ezek 15:1-8; Hos 9:1.

fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”<sup>24</sup> In the parable, Jesus, the gardener, asks for mercy: “Sir, let it alone *for one more year*, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”<sup>25</sup> Grace gives a second chance<sup>26</sup> and the owner agrees and grants a reprieve. Nevertheless, the story still a warning of the *urgency* of repentance; judgment is delayed only for a short time. As we heard from the prophet Isaiah, “Seek the LORD *while* he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he *will* have mercy on them . . . and will freely pardon.”<sup>27</sup> Time is precious, use it wisely!

I said earlier that the *kind* of God we believe in is vitally important. Jesus dismisses the Old Testament theology of divine retribution toward individual sinners without offering any simplistic answers to atrocities and calamities. Instead, he says God is gracious and even gives an unfruitful fig tree – Israel – another chance. Judgment is still in the picture; after all, mercy without accountability is cheapened in the long run. Yet judgement without grace is harsh.

Zooming back to creation: God granted room for human freedom and for freedom in the created order,<sup>28</sup> and therefore events happen that God does not control. Such human freedom is necessary for *love* to be an authentic choice, for love cannot be coerced. But sadly, we can abuse our freedom and power, as we have all graphically witnessed yet again these last few weeks. In the final analysis, we will *always* have our futile “Why?” and “What about...” questions, but I place this mystery in the complexity of creation rather than in the heart and purposes of God. I am therefore prepared to *trust a trustworthy* God in how he will ultimately address justice and mercy. Why, because I believe God’s character has been faithfully revealed in the life of Jesus Christ, whom God vindicated – as a matter of justice - by raising from the dead.

“Where then is God in life’s tragedies?” The Christmas story reminds us that Immanuel, “God *with* us,” begins with the helpless vulnerability of a child born to working-class parents. This reveals that God is not remote or uncaring but in Jesus the Messiah has shared in our human experience, including temptation and unjust suffering. God is not immune from human pain and tragedy. As a loving parent, God witnessed the torture and crucifixion of his only begotten Son at the hands of those God wanted to save. God’s suffering is a consequence of God’s love; that is always the price of freedom – and we have experienced that suffering ourselves in our own relationships. On our Lenten pilgrimage, we are to hold firmly on to “Immanuel” in life’s calamities; *God is along side us* for God has not abandoned his messy world. So as we *trust* God on the journey, let’s also remember the destination; as the writer of Colossians says: “God is working to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or in heaven,

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<sup>24</sup> Luke 3:8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 13:8-9. The work of God in Jesus’ ministry is the untense (“manure”) gardening that is the best Israel could hope for.

<sup>26</sup> For more on grace, see Luke 15:1- 32; for hope, see Joel 2:22.

<sup>27</sup> Isa 55:6-7.

<sup>28</sup> Freedom that is constrained by what we call the laws of nature.

by making *peace* through Christ's blood on the cross."<sup>29</sup> God calls us to partner with him in that endeavor and to wisely discern the signs of our times.

In conclusion, we can't protect ourselves and those we love from every danger, from disease, from traffic accidents, from crime, from emotional disorders, from war, from natural catastrophes, or from random events - including violent ones. But Jesus affirms that these are *not* God's deliberate doing. Such events remind us that life is uncertain and that any of us could stand before our maker without a moment's notice. We are to live each day remembering life is a gift from God, and if we do that and follow in Christ's footsteps, we have no cause to fear God. Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>29</sup> Col 1:20; see also: Eph 1:10; Rom 5:6-21; Gal 4:4-7; 1 Cor 15:20-28.