

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Lent 3  
February 28, 2016

## **The Lesson of Siloam** **Luke 13:1-9**

Every week there seems to be a catastrophe somewhere in the world. Floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, not to mention some terrorist event here or anywhere in the world, yet, for those who do not live near the affected area, life has gone on pretty much as usual. Isn't that often the way it is when a major catastrophe occurs somewhere else? We hear the news, but our own lives continue as before. But that reality sometimes brings to mind a question about the seeming inconsistent nature of catastrophes. And we may well ask; "Why them and not us?"

Sure, in this particular case, we can question the wisdom of choosing to live in a certain area of our country. Areas where much of the land is actually below sea level, but almost anyplace we choose to live has some potential risk. If we avoided every part of America that was at risk for tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, hail storms, droughts, dust storms, damaging winds, blizzards, earthquakes and other severe weather phenomena, we wouldn't have enough land for all of us.

Consider the little town of Bellevue, located in north central Ohio. That region is not often subject to disastrous weather. Yet one night, a tornado came through, ripped the roof off of one home and left the rest of the

community untouched. The residents of that home felt as if they had been singled out.

There was a time when people assigned religious significance to natural disasters. They were explained as acts of divine judgment. If we were to believe that today, we might conclude that the people of the Gulf Coast are worse sinners than we are.

But Jesus scotched that kind of thinking, as our Gospel reading shows. Jesus was speaking to a crowd and made some remarks about judgment. That apparently led someone in the crowd to ask him about some Galileans who were slaughtered by order of the Roman governor Pilate while they were in the process of offering sacrifices. Perhaps some in the crowd were thinking that that incident was an example of the judgment Jesus was talking about. But Jesus responded with a rhetorical question: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” And then he added another example, this time not something caused by somebody’s evil deed, but a simple accident: “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them?” Jesus then answered his own questions: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

In the context of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, Jesus’ remark might well have been, “Or the many killed or left homeless by Hurricane Katrina -- do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in America?”

Clearly the answer Jesus wanted his hearers to come to was “No.” In truth, his object in these comments was not to challenge the common belief in his day that trouble came to people who most deserved it, but rather to make the point that the coming judgment of God was inescapable and that all would face it. Still, his words show that Jesus did not buy the notion that disaster sought out the worst sinners.

Jesus further showed his conviction that incidents of weather or accident were not routinely used by God for reward or punishment when, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” No theology of retribution

All of this is what we might call the lesson of Siloam. That lesson is that Jesus does not support a theology of retribution and he does not offer simplistic answers to either atrocities or catastrophes. Whether human beings die by homicide, accident, illness, natural disaster or simply from old age, it is not because God has arbitrarily chosen to punish them for their sins while sparing others. Sudden calamity can serve as a warning that life is fragile and that we need to always be prepared to meet our Maker, but it should not be viewed as divine judgment.

Most of us probably accept that view of things today. We don't consider Hurricanes to be God's wrath being dumped on Gulfport, Mobile, Biloxi, New Orleans and the surrounding region. But consider that we do sometimes make such assumptions about ourselves when trouble befalls us. "What did I do to deserve this?" we might ask, or at least, we may feel we are somehow being targeted "by somebody up there" for special difficulties. Or we may assume that troubles have been sent our way to test our faith. Some years ago, a pastor named Kenneth Carlson had a heart attack. He survived it and later wrote:

I kept pondering how this could happen to me. Here I am a preacher; I go to church every Sunday, pay my tithe, and love my dogs. Imagine this happening to a minister!"

Feelings like those may be especially prevalent when we go through some crisis where we lose everything. Maybe our house burns to the ground, or we go bankrupt or have everything repossessed, or like the victims of tornadoes, we have all our earthly possessions blown away or washed away.

Yet to all of that we have Jesus' comments -- the lesson of Siloam -- that insist that God doesn't work that way.

But note that Jesus offers no explanation for these disastrous events either. That's how Christianity looks at them, too, as events without any theological explanation that we can see.

Instead, we say that any event in our lives, be it joyous or disastrous, may become an incident through which God speaks to us. Not that he sent the trouble to teach us a lesson or the joyous thing to reward us -- only that in God's economy, he can make use of whatever happens to communicate his love, his mercy, his calling or even his judgment when we need it.

So Christianity offers no theological solution to natural disasters and the like. Instead, we point to the cross of Christ and insist that there is no evil so dark that God cannot bring good out of it.

It may be hard for those whose lives have been disrupted by great disaster to say it, but the truth of the Gospel is that even those who have "lost everything" have in fact not lost everything. God continues to be with them, to whatever degree they had allowed him to be before the event. What's more, God may take advantage of the trouble to invite them closer.

Paul wrote to the Romans about this. He said, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." In other words, when we trust God and follow Jesus, we never lose everything.

Life's storms have a way of blowing away all that is superfluous and even much that we consider essential. And at the time, we cannot see it as anything but unmitigated disaster. In one way that assessment is correct.

There is no value in trying to say a catastrophe is not catastrophic. And there is no use pretending that we are glad that we have gone through it. What's more, some totally lose their way in the depths of trouble. Pain is really pain, trouble is really trouble, and disaster is really disaster.

But such experiences do remind us of our ultimate dependence on God. No pain, trouble or disaster is greater than God or beyond his ability to reach out to us.

Even if we never have to face a disaster like a tornado or flood or hurricane -- or something like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 -- the hour will come, for each of us, when everything we have owned or achieved will be stripped away, and we will have nowhere to look for deliverance but to God.

Robert Bellah, professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, has made a statement about loss that is worth hearing. I don't know what his personal experience of loss was, but I suspect it was something deeply painful. But here's what he said:

*The deepest truth I have discovered is that if one accepts the loss, if one gives up clinging to what is irretrievably gone, then the nothing which is left is not barren but enormously fruitful. Everything that one has lost comes flooding back again out of the darkness ... one's relation to it is now -- free and unclinging. But the richness of the nothing contains far more; it is the all-possible, it is the spring of freedom.*

There is great truth in that statement, and it is because of the sense of resurrection that God has hard-wired into life. We cannot make sense out of the capriciousness of nature and the randomness when natural catastrophes strike. But we can experience the power of resurrection in this life, discovering that in Christ, even when we have lost everything, we have, in fact, not lost everything, and have access to the spring of freedom.

That is not something one figures out on the morning after great loss, and there is no use in pretending loss is a good thing. Nonetheless, for those who abide in Christ, it slowly dawns on us that something of greatest value is flooding back.