

Repent
Luke 13:1-5
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” (NRSV)

Most news reports focus on sad, evil events. “Three People Die in Weekend Crash” says the headline on the front page of the paper. Listen to the news on your car radio and you might hear something like, “Today in western Kansas, a tornado ripped through several towns. As emergency workers rushed to the scene, observers feared that hundreds of people are dead.” Or, you watch the local news on TV, where you might see video footage of fire trucks in Elkhart, spraying water on a burning building. Maybe you’ll also see a report on who was arrested for possession of cocaine, who was sentenced to life in prison for murdering his girlfriend, and who was arrested for fraud. You might hear about the continuing wars in country X, the fighting among rival factions in country Y, and the the religious conflict in country Z.

One day some people came to Jesus with sad, evil news. This is one of the few times in the gospels when Jesus commented on some of the news events of his day. In the first century, there were no newspapers, no radios, no televisions broadcasting the ABC World News Tonight with David Muir. There was no Internet where Jesus could read the morning edition of the Jerusalem Post or the Rome Tribune on his iPad. None of these sources of news that we take for granted today had been invented yet. The only major source of news was other people—in other words, gossip networks. If there was a big fire that destroyed buildings in the village of Bethany, an eyewitness might tell the news to a traveling fig merchant, who might carry it with him up north to Galilee and pass it on to people in towns like Nazareth or Cana. In turn, those people told other people, and so the

news traveled rapidly from one place to another until everyone heard it. News got to people by word of mouth.

This is a major reason why the Romans crucified criminals and political rebels outside in public venues. Whenever the Romans wanted to crucify someone, they deliberately chose the most visible, public location they could find. Often this was at the intersection of two highways, or perhaps along a major road leading in and out of a city. In the absence of TV, radio, or newspapers, the Romans held crucifixions where as many people as possible could watch. The Romans relied on those eyewitnesses to tell others who would tell still others until the news got out everywhere. The message which the Romans wanted to communicate through these crucifixions was simple and direct: “You scumbags had better not mess with us. If you do mess with us, this is what we will do to you. We will whip you to an inch of your shabby, worthless life, then nail your bloody body up on a cross until you die in agony.” Crucifixion was a form of state terrorism, deliberately intended to instill fear into subject peoples.

In Luke 13, the gossip networks bring news to Jesus about another act of state terrorism, this one perpetrated by Pontius Pilate, the local Roman governor. The details of this incident are not clear, but apparently some Galilean Jews traveled south to Jerusalem to worship in one of the Jewish religious festivals, where they planned to offer a sacrifice to God. We don't know what they hoped to sacrifice, perhaps a lamb or a pair of turtledoves. After arriving in Jerusalem they did something that displeased Pilate, again we don't know what. So Pilate ordered his soldiers to kill these Galileans, and then to mix their blood with their sacrifices. This story fits well with what we know of Pilate from other ancient historians. Pilate was a little too violent as a governor, a little too cruel to the locals, a little too willing to use meanness and brutality.

The second news incident Jesus comments on was not an act of state terrorism, but an accident. A tower in the city of Jerusalem, called the Siloam tower, suddenly crashed to the ground one day. The falling stones hit eighteen people who were unlucky enough to be underneath when the tower collapsed. Possibly the tower had been badly constructed and was inherently weak. For whatever reason it fell, and it killed people who happened

to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Today if such a thing happened, the families of the victims might sue the architect who designed the tower and the contractor who built it, but that wasn't possible in the first century. When disasters like that happened, you poured out your laments to God and then went on as best you could.

At least on the surface, it sounds like Jesus responds to these news stories without much compassion for the unfortunate victims and their families. To paraphrase Jesus, he says something like this: "Well, do you think all those dead people were worse sinners than other people who survived these tragedies? No, the people who died were not worse sinners. Their sins were no bigger and no more awful than your sins. So let all those dead people be a lesson to you. Repent now, while you're still alive and you still have the ability to repent. If you do not repent now, you might die as suddenly and as painfully as those people in the news did. Repent or perish!"

Ouch. That sounds a little harsh. Not very compassionate.

But maybe we could look at this another way. Maybe it actually is compassionate. Christians of the first century believed that the reign of God had arrived in a new and profound way in the person of Jesus. Jesus himself represents the best gift that God offers to our mean and brutal world. Now is an excellent time to respond to this fascinating, compelling Jesus. Time is short. Even if the world continues for thousands of years more, you or I may have only days left to live. On the way home from church I could drive down Greene Road and unexpectedly die in a car accident. Or you could. At any time, a sad, evil event could end our life.

So considering this, maybe Jesus' words that sounded so harsh really are compassionate after all. Maybe Jesus is simply being realistic. The world has plenty of deliberate evils like political assassinations, and plenty of accidental evils like falling towers. That's the way the world is. And if that's the way the world is for now, then perhaps the most grace-filled response, the most loving response, the most compassionate response to the news that Jesus could possibly make is precisely the one he did make: repent.

Repent, and embrace the gift of God in Jesus.