



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
MARCH 24, 2019
LUKE 13: 1-9
THE UNANSWERABLE WHY

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 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 are transformed, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were guiltier than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you are transformed, you too will all perish.”

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. 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?’

“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

- Ben Rothlisberger, Mike Tomlin, and Antonio Brown are traveling on a goodwill trip to Syria when they are captured by rebel troops.
- A firing squad is formed and, as the rebels are loading their guns, Ben thinks, “I’ve got to cause a diversion so I can get away.” He yells, “Oh no, a tornado!” and points behind the firing squad. As they turn around to see the tornado approaching, Ben jumps over a wall and runs away.
- The firing squad turns its attention back to Tomlin and Brown. Tomlin figures Ben’s trick worked wonders, so he yells, “earthquake.” As the firing squad scambles for a place to take cover, Tomlin jumps over the wall and escapes.
- The firing squad resumes their stance and takes aim at Antonio. Thinking that if he can create a diversion he, too, will be able to escape, Antonio shouts “fire!”
- Given the drama around the Steelers, we might not think of this story as a tragedy, but that’s what we’re faced with in our gospel story and, at some point, in all our lives.
- When seemingly inexplicable tragedy strikes, the conundrum facing us has been put this way:

- If God is good, then he cannot be all-powerful, because how could an all-powerful God allow so much misfortune and heartbreak to occur.
 - If God is all-powerful, then he must not be good because how could a good God stand by without taking action to prevent so much pain and agony.
- In one word: Why?
 - Given my mother's murder, my father's slow descent into suicide, I've pondered the whys for decades. I'll be honest with you this morning and, in doing so, I hope I am not too brutally so....
 - I don't know how many of us have stood by a loved one's casket at the funeral home as people pay their respects.
 - There are well-meaning and caring people who speak out of a sentimental faith. They say things like "she's in a better place" or "God needed another angel."
 - Aren't most of us willing to wait on a "better place" because this life is pretty sweet? And, if God needs another angel, God is less well put together psychologically than I am.
 - In the face of tragedy, others like to fall back on, "it's all part of God's plan." This one went out the window for me while standing in front of my fifty-year-old murdered mother's coffin, a devout Lutheran and lovely person.
 - Hey, but maybe she was being punished for getting a little tipsy on numerous occasions at the officer's club in Columbus, Ohio, lighting a cigarette, and singing standards with the jazz trio. Maybe she should have just stuck with the church choir.
 - Hopefully, that sounds absurd, but "is God punishing us when something bad befalls us?" was a question in Jesus' day and ours.
 - Or, often a tragic situation is framed by someone in a somewhat different light....
 - A tornado sweeps through a small, midwestern town and oddly, always seems to be attracted to trailer parks. All of them are swept away except one. Invariably, the person thanks God for sparing them.
 - Really?

- Think about these two scenarios.
- Do we think God looks around and says, “Bill Jones cheated on his income tax, is mean to his wife, drinks too much, and is a Cleveland Browns fan. I’m going to arrange a fatal car crash today. “
- Or the reverse, “I’m sending a tornado through Armpit, Illinois, and despite not having bathed in three weeks, having only four teeth, and being the most hated woman in the trailer park, I’m going to spare her life.”
- Do we really think God manipulates the universe in these ways?
- Often, such distorted God images are rooted in our parental experiences. Parental patterns of rage, unfair punishments, inconsistent responses, and just the fragile human material that haunt all of us can lead us to have rather primitive and angry internal images of God.
- I think of an evangelical Christian friend whose response to my mother’s murder was, “Maybe this was God’s way of getting you to go to seminary.”
- Seems rather extreme, doesn’t it? How about just award me a scholarship? Or have a pastor suggest I might do well in seminary? And, isn’t this just a bit unfair to my mother?
- Again, is this how we image God?
- ...so, put yourself in this situation:
- You’re in Miami, Florida. There is chaos all around you, caused by a hurricane and severe floods. You’re a news photographer in the middle of this massive destruction. The situation is hopeless. But, you’re shooting a series of impressive photos.
- Houses and people float all around you, appearing and disappearing in the water.
- Suddenly, you see a man in the water fighting for his life, trying to survive this mass of water and debris. You move in slower. He looks familiar. It’s Tom Brady.

- The water is about to take him away---forever. You have two options. You can either save him or take a Pulitzer Prize winning photo displaying the death of a world class athlete.
- So please honestly answer the question: would you select color film or go with the simplicity of classic black and white?
- Another response to tragedy that sometimes involves some avoidance of personal or collective responsibility is “Satan is involved.”
- This perspective was rejected by the ancient church, which both refused to accept that an evil entity has that much power or that God has so little. And usually “the devil made me or someone else do it” is a copout, relieving us of facing our own or another’s responsibility.
- St. Paul answers the “why question” by suggesting that “all things work together for good to them that love God.” I find this one hard to buy.
- Again, the random shooting deaths at the Las Vegas music festival, Parkland High School, Tree of Life synagogue, or in the mosques in New Zealand will yield no good for the dead, a lifetime of trauma and sorrow for their families and, at least in our country, no change that prevents future disasters.
- Again, I don’t want to be too brutal, but the only people I see getting any good out of it are politicians on both sides....
- Finally, the sad truth in our time is that increasing numbers of people are rejecting the existence of god as the solution.
- “life stinks and then you die.”
- No meaning, no purpose....
- But, if we stick close to the gospel text, Jesus sidesteps “the Why?”
- In response to both tragedies, Jesus says, “unless you are transformed, you too will perish.”

- Jesus turns us from focusing on God, asking “Why” to focusing on our own lives to ask, “what the heck are we doing with our own path of transformation.”
- The only “Why” might be “Why are you focusing on somebody else’s life and not on your own?”
- Steve mentioned in his sermon at my installation as your Pastor that people comment, “Pastor Scott talks about transformation a lot.”
- Yes, but I talk about it because Jesus talks about it.
- And what does Jesus mean?
- Frankly, we may think of a gentle Jesus, like the hymn “softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling.”
- Here Jesus is neither soft or tender.
- In the face of these peoples’ tragic deaths, Jesus points to each of us and, instead of “Why,” asks a **hard How**: How are you being transformed into who God wants you to be? Because you, too, will perish—suddenly or slowly. No one gets out alive.
- And here, his example is instructive.
- He points to a fig tree. A fig tree has one purpose: to bear figs as abundantly and beautifully as it can. And the fig tree Jesus focuses on ain’t doing its job. It is bearing no figs. It is just taking up space. If it’s not accomplishing its purpose for being on earth, dig it up, and use it for firewood.
- But, even here is grace. A one year reprieve to see if the tree can get its axe together, I mean act.
- In one of my stretches of therapy—after my father’s first attempted suicide and my mother’s murder, my therapist asked me to take a battery of tests in order to get a grasp of how psychologically damaged I was. He didn’t say it that way, but he and I both knew, by his selection of tests, what he was wanting to measure.

- One, in particular, really shows how off-center we might be. Questions are like “Do you think Jesus is returning soon?” And “Are people out to get you?” You feeling me?
- So, after I took them and they were scored, we sat down and John said something like, “Given what you’ve been through, you should be a lot more messed up than you are. You might want to think about why you’ve been spared.”
- Don’t look at God. Don’t look at other people. Look at yourself.
- I somehow dodged a bullet. Or, perhaps I have a strong psychological constitution. Who knows.
- But, perhaps, a different Why. Why am I here?
- Why are you here?
- And a what? What am I here for? What are you here for?
- If you think it’s just a random universe with no meaning, then just go ahead and go about your life without reflection and thought and prayer.
- But, if you have even an iota of faith in life, then forget the whys about the tragedies and traumas of your life. We’ve all got them. It’s not what happens, but how we respond. Our frame of mind. Our willingness to keep our hearts open.
- Follow Jesus.
- Why are you here?
- And what are you here for?
- Sermon song: **WHY ME?** By Kris Kristofferson