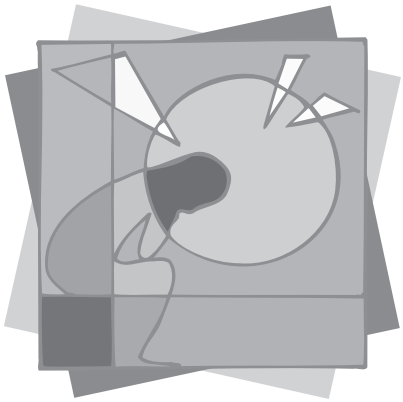
Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem

SESSION 3

Bible focus: Luke 13:1–9

Introduction

This conversation between Jesus and some questioners from a crowd following him strikes modern readers as curious at the least, if not utterly enigmatic. But for all its strangeness in our ears, the story surfaces three important themes. First, it raises the ancient "theodicy question." Second, it calls for "repentance" and invites an exploration of the meaning of that awkward word. Finally, the concluding parable of the fig tree serves to underscore the urgency of Jesus' message.



The conversation begins with a "current events" question from the crowd. Someone asks about a calamity in the news, "How about those poor Galileans Pilate murdered, mingling their blood with their sacrifices?" This gruesome tale is recorded nowhere else in history. It seems to refer to some outrage in which that infamous Roman governor had murdered a crowd in Galilee while they were at worship. The questioners in the crowd are reading their newspapers, as it were, and trying to discern meaning in another of the mindless tragedies that litter history.

The way in which they ask the question and the way Jesus answers hint that they probably thought they knew the answer. It calls to mind the old saying, "Why ask a question unless you know the answer?" "Look at those Galileans," they're saying, "everybody knows about Galileans. They're politically rambunctious and theologically deviant. They went too far again and they got what they had coming to them. Isn't that right, Jesus?" This was probably mainstream theological thinking in Jesus' Jewish world: bad things happen to bad people because God is just. "Everybody down here in Judea knows Galileans are a bad brood. This just proves it."

Jesus response is effectively, "Nonsense! You don't really think that those Galileans were bigger sinners than anybody else?" Then he brings up his own "current event," this one closer to home. "What about that tower that collapsed on those people *right here in Jerusalem?*" These victims were right-thinking, straight-and-narrow Jerusalem types. And they were just standing there—in the wrong place at the wrong time. They weren't big sinners; everybody knew Jerusalem was the global capital of proper piety. The implication of Jesus' news bite is that if bad things can happen to saints in Jerusalem in the same way bad things happen to rebellious Galileans, life must not be as simple as you think.

The question that hangs over this conversation is so venerable that it has its own name—the "theodicy question." "Why do bad things happen to good people?" or

as it is being put here, "Is it true that bad things happen to bad people?" This crowd didn't so much want to know the answer. They just wanted to believe it.

Jesus punctuates each of these two current-event stories, theirs and his, with a confrontational call to repentance. This becomes the second of three central themes raised in these verses. He says twice, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." The radical nature of this invitation is articulated in the word that both John the Baptist and Jesus used. It's an awkward, thoroughly un-modern word, one we usually misunderstand. The Greek term *metanoia* is translated into English as "repent," in our minds an edgy little word belonging to the angry and accusatory Bible thumpers. We imagine it to mean "get on your knees, blurt out your sins, and say you're sorry." But this understanding is misleading, if not inaccurate. The Greek word literally means "to turn around." It means to "do a 180." If you're going east and do a *metanoia*, now you're going west. If you're going south and do a *metanoia*, now you're going north. The point is that if you "repent and believe in the Gospel," you're not just listing your sins; you are charting a new course in life. *Metanoia* doesn't mean a mere 10-degree course correction, mind you. The *metanoia* point is that faith in Jesus invites nothing less that a 180-degree course correction.

Jesus concludes his answer by telling a parable, one similar to ones he tells in Matthew 21:18–19 and Mark 11:12–14. He tells of a fig tree that bears no fruit. The owner of the land on which it has been planted tells his gardener to cut it down, but the gardener pleads for another year, just one more year, promising to fertilize it well. Like most of Jesus' parables, this one is multilayered and subtle. At the least, the story bespeaks two things: the sharp urgency to get on with living a life of fruitfulness and the mercy of the gardener eager to offer a second chance.

Theodicy

Like the crowd that day, many people today still want to believe that bad things happen to bad people. They long to believe it because if it's true that people get what they've got coming (more or less), it means they are in control of life's calamities. "Bad things usually happen to people who have done *something* to deserve it. If I keep my nose clean, I'll be okay."

I recall an illustrative instance of this human longing for a tidy world in which people get what they've got coming. I was at a committee meeting with about a half-dozen people around a table. A common friend came in the room with a grim look on his face and told us that someone we all knew had just been diagnosed with lung cancer. A stunned silence descended on the room and hung there until somebody finally asked the question that had crossed every mind around that table: "Was he a smoker?" "Yes, he was," came the answer. And with that answer, the oddest thing happened. I sensed a perverse, collective sigh of relief in the room. The old warped logic was confirmed. You get what you deserve. If I keep my nose clean, I'll be okay.

But this is not, of course, how the world works. Yes, there is a deadly connection between smoking and cancer, but the hard truth is that some people who never touch a cigarette do get lung cancer and some lifelong smokers die in skiing accidents in their late eighties. Life isn't the tidy cause-and-effect equation we rather wish it to be. Returning to Jesus' point, those Galileans didn't "get it" from Pilate because they had it coming. And those Jerusalemites didn't die in a hail of bricks because they had it coming either.

The deadly tsunami in the Indian Ocean just after Christmas of 2004 was a modern "current event" that asked the old theodicy question again. One hundred fifty thousand lives lost and millions left homeless—how in the world do you reconcile belief in a merciful God with the reality of such a horror? It's not just tsunamis, of course. The magnitude of that event simply shoved the question in our face. It's also mudslides in Central America, breast cancer, malaria, and Lou Gehrig's disease. It's the innumerable terrors woven into the human experience. As you might imagine, volumes have been written on the theodicy question, and I'm hardly going to wrap it up in these several pages. In fact, even those many volumes offer no neat packages to wrap up the theodicy mystery. There are no simple answers, but there are credible responses. I am going to note three, all from the Bible. The first two, though helpful, are not quite enough. The last comforts me most deeply.

The first goes like this. Even though tragic death and pain are real now, they are not God's ultimate will. That strain of literature in Scripture that falls under the heading of "apocalyptic" promises that God's final

purpose, the ultimate divine vision, is a world beyond such horror. Apocalyptic hope is of comfort to many. I trust it to be somehow true, though I doubt it was much comfort to a Sri Lankan father who lost his parents, his wife, and all his children. Obviously, even the deepest trust that the anguish that darkens life is not God's final word leaves unanswered the question, "What about my pain *now*?"

The book of Job offers another classic response to the theodicy question. The orthodoxy of Job's day also seems to have insisted that good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people. If it didn't look that way it was only because one hadn't looked into all the dark corners. Loss and suffering descend upon Job, who asks why this has befallen him. A tiresome parade of "comforters," as they are traditionally called, offer Job the stock answer of the day: "Job, look hard, you must deserve it, because God *is* just." Finally, at the end of the book, God answers Job's "why?" question not with an answer but with a thousand questions: "Where were you, Job, when I planned the earth? Where were you when the morning stars sang together? Where were you when I stopped the waters?"

This is not really an answer to the theodicy question. The Heavenly Voice simply tells Job that there's so much he just doesn't know. The Voice reminds Job that there's a divine purpose transcending mortal wisdom, a great mystery that bursts the borders of his logic. A powerful response, perhaps, but to my mind it's still not enough.

At the core of Christian faith lies the trust that God has spoken another word. It is in this word that I find the deepest comfort. This word is Jesus Christ. His life and his death are in themselves a response to the theodicy question. His cross is the most ironic of signs—death and life are there, suffering and triumph both. This is the central Christian response to the theodicy question, though not a formulaic answer. It does not wring the mystery from life and death, but it is the divine response that is balm to my soul.

In the cross, God promises that the divine presence has been with us, is with us, and shall be with us through all the pain, all the evil, all the bloody tyrants, all the collapsing towers, all the tsunamis and mudslides, all the heart defects and fast-acting viruses of the world. The cross is the sum of it all, and by the cross God declares in a way deeper than words, "Know that there is no pain that you can bear that I have not borne; there is no darkness the world might see that I have not also seen; there is no fear that might grip you that I have not known. All that comes to you, I have passed through with you and for you."

Repentance

Jesus' sharp word in the face of the reality of the contingency and vulnerability of life is an urgent invitation to repentance, *metanoia,* that 180-degree change of course. It asks us to turn everything we are toward God. It is no mere 10-degree course correction; it is nothing less than a 180-degree reorientation of the whole self toward God.

There is an old tale for the story of the conversion of Europe that pictures this point memorably. That ancient pagan tribe of lusty warriors named the Franks was among the first of the Germans to be converted to Christianity. Like many tribes during this era, the Franks were converted to Jesus en masse, and they underwent group baptism by wading into some river to be baptized by the thousands. They understood what this meant at some level, that this would make them followers of a new king, Jesus. They understood that this Jesus was a Prince of Peace, doubtless an ironic title in their ears. The story has it that when these Frankish warriors came to be baptized in the waters of the Rhine they were careful to hold their swords above their heads and out of the waters of baptism, not to save them from rust but to keep them from Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

It wouldn't do then. It won't do now. You can't hold your sword out of the water. You can't hold your career out of the water. You can't hold your love life out of the water. You can't hold your family out of the water. You can't hold even your most idle pastime out of the water. You can't hold your wallet out of the water. It all has to be baptized.

Urgency

Jesus ends this conversation with a parable that presses the urgency of this *metanoia,* this decision and commitment, upon his listeners. I recently saw a television commercial for the Royal Bank of Scotland. It was touting the bank's decisiveness. The commercial showed a couple at a wedding; the minister asks the groom the big question, "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" The guy looks pensive, hesitates, and finally answers, "Well, that's a very good question." There's a stunned silence, naturally, an awkward silence finally broken by one of the groomsmen, who waves his hand in the air and calls out, "I do!"

A few years ago I pulled into the driveway of our house back in Ann Arbor to see a late-afternoon two-on-two basketball game in process. It was warm for March; all four players were hard at it, working up a sweat. On one team were my son and his buddy, Brett. Their opposition was a father-daughter team whose family had just moved into the neighborhood. The dad was obviously a fine player; he would later mention that he'd coached for several years. His daughter, Kayla, a lanky eleven-year-old, was playing quite a game herself. Dad, who was a foot and a half taller than everybody else, was taking no shots himself, but he got most of the rebounds and was feeding the ball to his daughter at every opportunity.

As I climbed out of the car, I heard somebody yell out the score, 19 to 20, playing to 21. The game was getting hot. Fourteen-year-old boys don't like getting beat by eleven-year-old girls, even ones with a hotshot dad. The ball was spending most of the time in the hands of the father-daughter team. The two boys were dashing around the driveway offering a frantic defense. Again and again, Dad would grab the rebound and pass the ball to his daughter. The boys would be all over her, waving their arms wildly in her face. With each rebound her dad gave her, Kayla would move to the right only to encounter an arm-waving boy, then move to the left and meet the other boy leaping and yelling. She'd look back to the right, back to the left, and then she'd try to find her dad's eyes as if to say in desperation, "What should I do, Dad?" Finally her father stopped the game, put his hands on his hips, and said to his daughter, "Kayla, you just have to decide and live with the decision."

This is simply true across life. Decisions about work and family, even religious faith, require something of a leap. There's a necessary risk because commitments often must be made without all the facts. It has to be that way, for the ironic truth is that so much of what you come to know about life and about other people and about God is found only *after* you take the leap. That is to say, the road itself is the teacher, and the deep things are often hidden from the eyes of those who never risk the road.

Should I take the job? What should I study in school? Should I marry this person? Should I follow Jesus and try faith? So often what you need to know about such decisions can be known only when you take the leap. "Kayla, you just have to decide and live with the decision." That, I said to myself, is not just basketball wisdom.

About the Writer

Michael A. Lindvall is pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City.