

Topic: Finding Meaning through Suffering

Subtopic: Suffering raises questions that should redirect us toward living a purposeful life.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/Q9g3BVhvKGI>

Last week, we talked about the need for a single-minded focus in our Christian life. Today's Gospel makes those objectives and goals personal. Jesus takes some of the most common and complicated questions and assumptions concerning suffering and makes them personal.

It has often been thought that when a preacher gets personal, he has entered into dangerous territory, for he has gone from preaching to meddling. So I can't help but meddle this morning. But preaching, if it is ever to make a practical impact, has to get personal. It has to connect with where we live, how we think, and how we act, even when it makes us feel guilty. A message of repentance is always a touchy thing. No one likes to feel guilty, but it is an emotion that we have to deal with, whether we like it or not. And in the midst of our mixed feelings, God is calling us to find a way through it so that we can be more fruitful. Which, by the way, is the message of the Fig Tree. Its message that includes repentance is meant for good so that we refocus on our purpose to live more fruitfully.

One of the first examples Jesus uses is the way people view suffering. And when he lived among us, he knew what people were thinking when they encountered suffering. Like many of us, am I the only one who thinks, "What did I ever do to deserve this? So when they heard about "*the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices,*"<sup>1</sup> Jesus knew precisely

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13:2

the kind of question they were having. So, Jesus asks them, ***“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you.”***<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Christians have long wondered why bad things happen to people, even good people. In his book *The City of God*, St. Augustine considered the great suffering that occurred when the barbarians sacked Rome, and he noted that when the barbarians raped and pillaged, Christians suffered just as much as non-Christians. Faith in Christ did not make them immune to pain and tragedy. Augustine wrote, “Christians differ from Pagans, not in the ills which befall them, but in what they *do* with the ills that befall them.” The Christian faith does not give us a way around tragedy. Faith provides us with a way through tragedy.

Therefore Jesus says, ***“unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”***<sup>3</sup> Evidently, Jesus refuses to get caught up in the questions of whether or not someone else deserves to suffer and instead asks another question: What is there in your life that needs repenting, acknowledging, and turning around? To illustrate his point, he shares the Parable of the Fig Tree. In it, the gardener is a practical man who exercises patience and endurance as he waits for the tree to produce fruit. But when none appears, he gives it one last chance. He digs around it, puts fertilizer on it, and waits another year for it to produce results. As we apply this parable to our lives, we can conclude that God is not playing games with us. We have a purpose and are called to produce fruit. All the nutrients that God gives us are not to be wasted just on ourselves. God gives us grace, but his grace is not to be presumed upon. There is **a time when no more chances will be given.** Therefore the scriptures tell us, ***“Today if you hear his voice***

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 13:2-3a

<sup>3</sup> Luke 13:3b

*harden not your hearts.*<sup>4</sup> That word for us today is the need that we all have for repentance. It is a call to change and be open for God to do a new thing. But if we are not careful, we find ourselves making the same kind of presumptions that the Israelites made in the wilderness.

Paul tells us in our New Testament lesson today, **“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters.”**<sup>5</sup> The Israelites enjoyed God’s presence, protection, nurture, and care in the wilderness, which they misinterpreted and took for granted. In their ungratefulness, they took their newfound freedom and promises of God’s steadfast love as a license to blatantly disobeyed the very things that God had forbidden. And to make matters worse, they excused their pursuit of selfish pleasures and behaviors in the presumption that God would always love them and unconditionally forgive them, not thinking that their sin, even when forgiven, still has devastating consequences.

Then in our Gospel, we see a picture of people who wanted to apply Biblical principles to everyone except themselves. But Jesus skillfully turns their focus by the use of a parable that begs the question, **“What about you?”** The universality of Jesus’ teaching is **much like a picture of Jesus where his eyes follow you no matter which way you turn.** Those eyes of his see the need that we all have for repentance.

I have been reading an old classic called Pilgrim’s Progress. It is a book that depicts all the trials and temptations that many Christian pilgrims encounter. In it, the person named Christian gets off the straight and narrow way, and when he does, he finds

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 95

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:1

no peace until he gets back on the path that leads to the celestial city. In this journey, he finds a constant need for correction and instruction.

In the same way, our Lord, in the illustrations and parables he uses, was saying that the pertinent question is not how a person died or why a particular person died, but how they lived and why they lived. Therefore, we need to learn from every tragedy to number our days and apply our hearts to wisdom so that we will use every moment and live every day as fully as we can.

And since Lent is a season for self-examination, our parable calls us to ask, “In what ways are we expending all of our energy, all of our time, talents, and resources only on ourselves? If so, how can we begin to change?”

First of all, it begins with a change of heart. It starts with self-examing questions about the focus of our lives. Are we taking advantage of ways that we can bless others? And, are we aware that other, less essential matters have clouded our vision? If so, then let’s be prepared to amend our ways and make commitments that will enable us to be more fruitful. Amen.