

Sermon on **Luke 13:1-9** for the Third Sunday in Lent – 3.24.19
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church, New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf

50 dead in 2 mosques in Christchurch New Zealand. 11 killed in synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh. 2,996 killed in the Sept. 11th attacks. 23 people killed by storms that rip through Alabama. Over 1800 killed in Hurricane Katrina. Why did God allow this to happen? Why did they have to die? Human minds want specific reasons because we have a need to assign specific credit and blame (it's all about us or them and justifying ourselves) and we want to survive and prevent these things from happening to us and the people we care about. Today Jesus answers us and sets us straight. He preaches repentance because **God cares about you.**

“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 repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Awful, right. Pontius Pilate just seems like an awful person. Was this what Roman rule was like, that he comes into a place of worship and strikes down worshippers? What had those people done that they deserved to die this way or why did God allow Pilate to do something so horrendous? Sure, Pilate was a messed up individual and easy to blame him, but God could have prevented this. A tower in certain section of Jerusalem just falls and 18 people die. We have so little information but seems to be a random failure of a structure – still happens today. What about them? Why did they have to die? What had they done to deserve this? I have not died that way, does that mean that I must be doing something right? My life seems in decent order, is that because I'm doing things right?

“I tell you, no!” Jesus answers all these scenarios with the same answer. Where God has not drawn a direct line, you don't either. In our Old Testament lesson God drew a direct line for us. That serves as a warning to us not to do those things or think like those whom God judged. But these acts of violence and catastrophe Jesus recounts today, God had not drawn a direct line, though we (like those there that day) are always quick to offer a few possibilities. Jesus shuts it down.

Why are we here? It is no surprise that many who do not darken the door of church see you all as simply a group of hypocrites – people who live like the world out there, talk like it, act like it, steal and belittle like it, hate like it, but dress up a bit and put on a show for an hour or two when you walk in here. Or when one of us falls publicly, the world rejoices and shakes their head – “See, I told you.” Well, they're not entirely wrong. At least Jesus thought so. *“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?” “do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?”* It's much simpler in our minds if we can draw the line and link them.

Jesus shows us the line we should draw as he tells us twice, *“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”* There is a time and a place to discern and to judge, but first look in the mirror. What do you see? Draw that line. Don't rush away and try to forget. Really look. Take off the mask. God knows our hearts. God knows our deep need. They were no more deserving of what happened to them than you are. When calamity happens to others, when you think, “at least I'm not them,” “or I'm thankful I'm not him or her,” realize you are no better than them or more deserving of God's gifts. You too are a sinner, one deserving of way worse than a tower falling on you or the edge of a sword. You and I deserve death and hell -not only for our sinful actions, but for our excuses and

self-justifying attempts. Look in the mirror and see the state of affairs. It's downright scary. When Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" he's talking to you too.

He cares enough to say it. Look up. Look up to him, to his cross. Jesus was not saying these things to scare the people away, but to work repentance in their hearts. Repentance has two parts - sorrow over sin and trust in God's forgiveness. God must work both these things in us. And through his Word he does. These tragedies highlight our great sin and our great need. And they point us to his cross where God met our great need and his great judgement on sin and sinners as he punished his Son on the cross not with the crushing weight of a tower's stones, but the crushing weight of our guilt and shame. He brandished not the edge of a sword but nails to fix his target in place and unload his wrath and fury upon him until the payment was done and it was finished. God has worked repentance in your heart to see your deep need and look to your Savior Jesus as your only escape, your only comfort, the only source of forgiveness and eternal life. By his perfect life, his innocent death and his physical bodily resurrection Jesus won our justification, "not guilty" in the Father's judgment. Forgiven. **God cares enough to show us, to work this repentance and faith in us.**

"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. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" Jesus further illustrates God's patience and concern for all people. When you buy a fruit tree and plant it, what do you expect? Well, within a short time you expect some signs of fruit or that it will produce. That's why you bought it. If it doesn't produce, well, cut it down and use it for firewood or dump it at the yard waste site. You'll have room for a different tree, one that will produce. Jesus uses this picture to show how his Father works. The simplest interpretation is to apply this to ourselves - each person is that tree. We each receive the gracious gifts of God in different ways and times. However, those who reject Christ's gifts of grace and the preaching of his Gospel are like the tree that takes up room in the vineyard but has no fruit. Three years go by and the only thing stopping the ax is the patience of God. And when it is time the command is given. But a mediator steps up to intercede and encourage more mercy and patience. That mediator is our Savior Jesus who has won forgiveness for all mankind, who will dig up the soil, who will put fertilizer in ever hopeful for fruit to be produced.

This parable reminds us of the patience and love God has, but it also is a warning for us and all who hear it to not delay. We should never think we can set aside this faith that God has given us or that someone should delay repentance for whatever reason - to run after the things of this world, to have our fun, to try out every other road. The ax will come.

God has loved you enough to draw a line to your heart to show your need for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and resurrection. God has worked repentance in you that with eyes enlightened by the Word you see your sin and your Savior and his love. God produces that fruit of faith in you and strengthens it through the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. Remain in his Word. Show others the way. Go at your work as witnesses of his love with the same optimism that the vinedresser went to work on that fruitless fig tree. God is in control. God is just, patient and love. **God cares about you.** God cares about everyone. He cares enough to tell us and work this in us, **"Repent or Perish."** Amen.