



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Things Happen

Luke 13:1-9

Dr. Jeff Roberts

March 7, 2010

Things Happen! That is true every day. In the past few weeks things have happened. Whether it was the earthquakes in Haiti, Chile or Indonesia or the mudslides in Uganda, things – horrible things – happen. Not only the events of natural disaster but those events which have been caused by others have happened. There have been bombings that took innocent lives, shooters which sought to disrupt lives, as well as the host of local murders and assaults all over our nation in the past week. There are everyday car accidents and work accidents that cause pain and suffering. This is not to mention that every day there are people who get the bad news of the death of a loved one or a diagnosis that leaves them reeling.

It is in these moments that we want to ask the age-old question of God: “Why?” We want to try and understand why me or why them or just why. We don’t want life to be random. We want to make some sense of senseless moments and so we find ourselves continuing to ask that question of why.

I have always found this text to be one of the most intriguing texts of the Bible. I think it is intriguing because of what Jesus says and what Jesus does not say. If there was ever a time we could expect the answer to the question of life’s randomness and why things happen, it seems it should have come in this text and conversation. Yet, Jesus does not answer the question of why or address the randomness of death and trouble in life. We long for an answer of why but Jesus gives us two other answers.

I would suggest to you that in our text today there are three questions which emerge. They are the questions of why, what and who. It seems that Jesus gives us the answer to the last two but not to the big question of why. Or maybe Jesus does. Maybe in the answer of what and who we also find some answer to the question of why.

Let us look at our text in the context of these three questions. The questions revolve around what we might call the randomness of our world. By the

way, we do not want a random world. We want a world that makes sense at every point and a God whose actions or inaction also makes sense to us at every point.

Jesus begins this discussion by mentioning two events which his listeners would have recognized. These two events are somewhat a mystery to you and me but for them they would have been a recognizable reference. I think sometimes we forget that Jesus did not live, teach and minister in a vacuum. He did not hold court on a high mountain or in a distant sanctuary. Jesus was born into and lived in the context of his time, he was involved in the debates of his time, and he reacts and acts within the culture of his time. This does not mean that his words are not timeless or that the message of the gospel is for all people for all time but it does us good to realize that Jesus’ use of language, examples, stories and references were bound to his time, religion and culture.

Jesus refers to two events where there were horrible and unpredictable deaths. The first event is described as a time when Pilate mixed the blood of the Galileans with the blood of sacrifices. This event is a reference to an event that was caused by cruelty and evil of another. This event was not an accident but a deliberate act of another. Although exactly what occurred is still a mystery, the best guess is that Pilate attacked and killed some Galilean worshipers at the moment of worship to suppress a protest or to show his rule as being absolute.

Pilate served as the Roman Governor to the Jewish provinces. Pilate was known to be ruthless. He did many things to incite the hatred of Jewish people. He brought into Jerusalem, for the first time, the symbol of Caesar and demanded the worship of Caesar alongside the worship of God. He was known to use deceit and force to keep his rule. It is said that he would even put Roman soldiers, dressed as civilians, in the midst

of the people and the worshippers. He would use this tactic to guard against any insurgency so he could quickly suppress any revolt. It is known that later Pilate had his army attack worshippers in Samaria, and so violent and callous was his response, that he was called to Rome to answer for his actions before Caesar. Pilate is never heard from again after being called to Rome. It could be that this reference was one of those moments when Pilate had worshippers attacked during worship. They would have been vulnerable and not expecting such an attack. It would also make sense that their blood was mixed with the blood of the animals they were sacrificing.

We, too, live in a world where things happen as the result of the evil and poor choices of others. We many times suffer the consequences of not only our poor choices but the choices of others. Life is uncertain because evil is uncertain and we live in this uncertainty.

The second event that Jesus mentions is described as the 18 who died when Siloam's tower fell on them. This reference is very particular and specific to a time and place event in Jesus' day. It could be that a part of the wall near Siloam's pool collapsed and killed these 18 people. Other scholars make a reference to an aqueduct system that was being built in Jerusalem and that there is some consideration that this was a construction accident that might have killed workers and innocent bystanders. We will not know that exact event, but this we know: it is a result of what we would term an accident. It is something that happened and really has no explanation. Those who were killed we would say just were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The death of these victims we would put in the category of an accident, a natural disaster or something that was not caused by the intentional act of another.

These are the two events that Jesus uses as an example and most of all, the things that happen to us which are bad fall into these categories. Things happen and we can blame them on the act of another or our own actions. Things happen as the result of living in this world: we call them accidents or natural disasters.

This is the perfect time for Jesus to tell us once and for all why. Why do things happen where people suffer in such horrible ways? Why is there evil in our world like Pilate? Why are there accidents where people who are

just trying to make a living and go about life die? Why? But Jesus does not give us this answer. Instead he seems to give us answers to two other questions that arise from these events. Those questions are what and who. What are we to do in response to these events, and who can we turn to in these moments.

First, what can we do in response to these events? Jesus asks the question in both of these events whether those who died deserved it more than others. Were they greater sinners than others? The answer is an obvious no. Instead, Jesus says that we should watch our own lives and repent so that we should not perish. Now, Jesus uses this term *perish* not to describe a physical death but a spiritual death.

I have read this passage so many times trying to make sense of what Jesus is trying to tell us with these illustrations. Let me tell you what I have concluded: Jesus is telling us that it is not fruitful trying to spend our time making sense or rationalizing the things that happen to us. Even less useful is trying to point the finger of blame. We are guilty of this. When something happens to us we want to find someone else to blame. When a natural disaster comes there are some who go to great lengths to find a "reason" like voodoo or the sin of a city. When disease comes to us or one we love, we have to make some sense of it so we think of habits, genetics or something that makes it make sense.

Sometimes it is true we can find causes, but causes are the past. What can we do to move forward in such moments?

I think Jesus is telling us to answer the question of "What now?" "Now that this has occurred how can I respond?" In every situation – even the ones that seem out of our control – we do have control of one thing: How I am going to respond? Jesus says, in response to these two events, "Repent so that you do not perish." Repentance is a turning around but it is also an intentional decision. Jesus is telling us to respond with that which is within our control. That is the answer to "What now?"

How should we respond to the things that happen in our lives? Let us respond with accountability to God. If there is anything repentance means, it means to realize that we are accountable to God for our actions. So how do we respond to the things that happen? We respond with the knowledge that our actions are accountable to God. I think to be accountable to God is simply living



***“ . . . our God is  
the God who  
continues to  
show mercy,  
patience and  
love in the  
most difficult  
of moments.”***

our lives with the knowledge that God is God and I am not.

In the book of Job when Job asks that question why, God's answer essentially is "When did I become accountable to you?" In fact, God tells Job to brace himself like a man. Then for two chapters he inquires about Job's abilities to discern the issue of what is fair and unfair. God says to Job:

<sup>1</sup> *Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said:*  
<sup>2</sup> *"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"*  
<sup>3</sup> *Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.*  
<sup>4</sup> *"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.*  
<sup>5</sup> *Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it?"*  
<sup>6</sup> *On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone-*  
<sup>7</sup> *while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"*  
<sup>8</sup> *"Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb,*  
<sup>9</sup> *when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness,*  
<sup>10</sup> *when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place,*  
<sup>11</sup> *when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?"*  
<sup>12</sup> *"Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place,*  
<sup>13</sup> *that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it?"*  
<sup>14</sup> *The earth takes shape like clay under a seal; its features stand out like those of a garment.*  
<sup>15</sup> *The wicked are denied their light, and their upraised arm is broken.*  
<sup>16</sup> *"Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?"*  
<sup>17</sup> *Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?"*  
<sup>18</sup> *Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.*  
<sup>19</sup> *"What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside?"*  
<sup>20</sup> *Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings?"*  
<sup>21</sup> *Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years.*

What God is saying is "When did I become account-

able to you? When did I have to explain my ways to you? I am God and you are not." When things happen we must be like Job and declare "God gives and God takes away blessed be the name of the Lord." I live my life accountable to God and not visa versa.

Secondly, it means to act responsibly to others. Instead of pointing out why others are more sinful and deserve punishment or consequences, we must respond to the needs of others. When things happen, we not only remember that we are accountable to God for our reaction, but we must also think of how we can react responsibly to others who are involved. In the midst of pain, struggle and our response, we are to care for those who are hurting and be Christ to be those in that moment of pain.

Thirdly, the answer the question of "What now?" is to live with faith in our Lord Jesus. Jesus says that we are to repent so that we will not perish. This is a forward-looking statement. We are to live accountable to God and responsible to others with a faith in the future. No matter what might come our way, no matter what things might happen, Jesus gives us the answer to "What now?" We are to be accountable to God, responsible to others, and live with faith in Jesus for our future.

The other answer Jesus gives is to the question of whom. Who is present in the moments of pain and suffering when things happen? This question of who is also the question of where is God in such moments. Jesus gives us a picture of God in the parable he tells in response to this conversation. The parable is about a fig tree that is not bearing fruit. The tree has been given three years or a sufficient time to bear fruit and what needs to happen is to cut it down and start over. It is just wasting soil and water. Yet, the servant says "Give it another year. Withhold your judgment for now. Give it a little more time to do what it should do." The picture here is of God's mercy, grace and patience.

In the midst of terrible events, Jesus says God is not the God who is looking and just waiting for his moment to pounce and punish. No, he's just the opposite; God is offering mercy, help, patience and love. That is the picture of God. Now, to be sure God's patience is not forever – there will come a time of judgment but it will only come when God's mercy and love have been fully rejected.

When things happen we cannot blame God and say God is just waiting to punish us or them. No, just the opposite, for our God is the God who continues to show mercy, patience and love in the most difficult of moments. That is the answer to the whom in this passage.

Jesus essentially says in Luke 13 "things happen."

When things happen our first question is “Why?” but Jesus does not give us this answer. Instead, he tells us the answer to “What now?” We must be accountable, responsible and faithful. Jesus answers for us the question about the nature of God in such moments – God is full of mercy and love. But what about the question why? Is there an answer to this question?

As I said, it seems God’s answer in the Old Testament is “Who made you God? I am not accountable to you.” But I think God’s answer to why in the New Testament is more personal. You see, God’s answer to the question why in the New Testament is the cross.

Let’s think about the cross from an earthly perspective. From an earthly perspective the cross is the definition of “things happen.” Jesus’ death on the cross appears to either be the result of the work of evil men who betrayed and plotted Jesus’ death or it is the great misunderstanding of the ages where an innocent man gets caught up in a moment when everything comes together at the right moment to cause his death. Either way, from our earthly view is the reminder that things happen.

The stories in *Night* by Eli Wiesel tell the horrors of the Holocaust. One story told by Wiesel is about watching the hanging of three prisoners. The three were put on chairs and the noose put around their necks. Two of the prisoners were adults but the third was just a young boy. The process of the hanging occurred and the chairs were kicked out from under the victims. The two adults died quickly because of their weight. However, because the boy was so light he just hung there with his feet kicking gasping for breath. It took almost an hour for the child to die. As the others watched this horrible event which made no sense except for the consequence of evil and hate someone muttered “Where is God?” Wiesel remarks that somewhere within him he said the answer: “There he is hanging between heaven and earth somewhere between life and death.” Wiesel’s comment was more about the absence of God, but Jurgen Moltmann, the great German theologian, has used that comment to develop a theology of suffering to suggest that where God is in the moment of suffering is with

those who are suffering. Where was God at the cross? God was on the cross.

From a heavenly view, the cross is the reminder of the answers to the question of what and who. God’s answer to unfair suffering and forsakenness is to enter into such a moment himself. Jesus cries from the cross “My God why have you forsaken me!” Jesus is quoting Psalm 22:1. As one writer puts it “he takes an historic cry of human suffering and makes it his own.” From the heavenly point of view we understand the why as we look at the what and who of the cross. Jesus, in the face of the cross, is accountable to God the Father, he is responsible to you and me for he died for our sins, and he is full of faith in the future knowing that God the father will not abandon him in the grave. In addition, the cross reminds us of the true nature of God. God does not want to punish us for our sins; in fact, God would rather take the punishment himself than for us to suffer our consequences. That is the God of the cross.

Things happen. Bad things happen. In those moments is the real question for us why or are the real questions we need to answer what now and what does God want us to know about his nature in this moment?

I know that for many of you this is not the answer you want, but I want to remind you of something about suffering and pain from the cross. It is in a moment of pain that our healing comes. It is in a moment of being forsaken that our reconciliation to God occurs. It is in the depth of suffering that the fullness of God’s love is revealed.

Things happen. They happen to you, they happen to me, they happen to those we love, they happen to others. What are we going to do? Let’s respond as Jesus suggests. Let’s be accountable to God, responsible to others, and trust God for the future. Let’s discover in those moments the fullness of God’s love toward us. It could be that in our seeking to answer the questions of what and who that the peace of why might come as well.

If I could put this sermon in one phrase it would be this “Things Happen and God Is Good.” Is that enough of an answer for you when things happen? ❖



Trinity Baptist Church • 4815 Six Forks Road • Raleigh, NC 27609 • 919.787.3740

www.tbcraleigh.com • jroberts@tbcraleigh.com