

This would not be my usual choice, but the other day I was low on groceries, hungry, and looking for something convenient, so ended up in the drive through at Panda Express. When I got home, in the bottom of the take-out bag I found an unopened, perfectly sealed yet completely empty package that was supposed to have my fortune cookie in it. I hope that wasn't some kind of sign.

I doubt that most of us honestly put too much stock in coincidences and superstitions, the heads-up pennies, four leaf clovers, broken mirrors, or spilled salt that are inevitable parts of life, but there is something in human nature that drives us to make sense of chance events and to find order in a world that is often too random for comfort. Unfortunately, this need to explain things, especially why bad things happen to good people, can cause us to make judgments that are not ours to make. Actions have consequences, of course, but blaming accident victims for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time only works if we ignore many stories in scripture that wrestle with theodicy—where we can find a good God in the midst of suffering. It might be unintentional, but we are, in fact, making a faith claim when we label a natural disaster an “act of God,” or when, observing someone's tragedy from afar, we sigh, “there but for the grace of God go I.”

Jesus' followers fell into this trap of blaming victims for a tragedy that Jesus didn't think was their fault. We don't have any further explanation from scripture or other historical sources to explain what exactly Pilate did to the Galileans, but the people seem to assume that it was the victims of the violence, and not the perpetrator, who was to blame. Jesus says, No. Then he gives them another example from current events—18 people who were killed when a tower collapsed. Was it because they were the 18 very worst people living in Jerusalem? Again, Jesus says, No. Jesus' followers seem to want the assurance that the people who suffered deserved to suffer—or at least were more deserving of suffering than their neighbors who escaped. We would think that, recognizing ourselves as sinners, we wouldn't want God to enact that simple cause-and-effect punishment—that we would want grace. But at least if we knew the world worked that way, rewarding good with good, punishing bad with bad, we could feel like we had control—even if that means blaming ourselves for the inexplicable bad things that happen to us. Where would we rather live: a world where we can control our own destiny or a world where we can do everything right and still be the victims of a completely random tragedy?

Jesus makes it clear that the victims are not to blame for their sudden demise. But he doesn't give his curious followers a false sense of security, either. *No, they didn't bring these*

*tragedies on themselves, but unless you repent, you will perish as they did.* The option that Jesus gives them here is not to behave better in order to avoid a tragic and untimely death. There wasn't anything the Galileans or the eighteen could have done to prevent those tragedies; there will always be accidents and atrocities, from natural causes and human abuse—and if those don't get us, there will always be disease and old age. What Jesus does encourage them to do is to live as God intended so that when their death eventually comes, as it comes for all of us, they (we) will be prepared. However, it's important for us to understand what that preparation means. It is not whether we will have done something to prepare *ourselves* for life after death. The question is whether we will be able to look back see that we have used the time we have been given in *this life* to bear fruit for the good of those around us.

Jesus' parable tells us what it means when we're not bearing fruit: *I keep looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Why should it be wasting the soil?* The owner of the vineyard planted the fig tree so that it would produce figs; if it doesn't do that, it's just wasting the soil. We, too, are called not just to exist but to live for a purpose. We're not going to live forever, but for as long as we do, we're really only living out our purpose when we are bearing fruit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—all things that primarily benefit other people. We don't live this way in order to avoid accidents or tragedies; we live like this because that's what God calls us to do, for whatever time we have—because making life more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more gentle for those around us is the fertilizer for *their* growth, helping them to live the same way. And that's how this world starts to look more and more like God's vineyard.

Anamae reminded me this week of something CS Lewis wrote regarding the anxiety of what, in his time, was the new age of atomic weapons—humanity's latest addition to this potential for sudden, widespread, tragic loss of life. Lewis said, *If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts...* He said, and he was quite right, *death itself is not a chance at all, but a certainty.* Perhaps we understand that now better than ever, living during another war as well as a pandemic; we're all on the gardener's borrowed time. For however many years we have, may God help us to not just live, but to live into the purpose for which we have been called, bearing fruit that nourishes others.