

Lent 3C 2025 Luke 13:1-9

One of my favorite contemporary writers is church historian Kate Bowler, who started her career researching the rise of the prosperity gospel, which is the belief that you can tell how faithful you are based on how richly God has blessed you. At a relatively young age, while raising a still very young child, Bowler was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, and from that experience she wrote a memoir entitled *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. Not always knowing what to say in the midst of tragedy, we sometimes hear that sentiment *everything happens for a reason*... which is meant to be comforting, but also reflects how our culture resists facing hard truths, dealing with disease and death, or admitting we do not have control over much of anything. We want to believe there is a reason when something bad happens, even if that means blaming ourselves, because blaming ourselves is still less scary than accepting that tragedy can strike at random. We struggle to admit we can't control everything, yet we're surrounded by examples of life's unpredictability: the health obsessed athlete who drops over dead at 40 while the pack-a-day smoker who only eats fried food lives to be 100. Now, it is true that *some* things happen for a reason, and sometimes that reason is that we make bad choices. But to say that *everything* happens for a reason, especially when we imply that it's *God* making everything, including everything tragic, happen... that puts us on a slippery slope, which leads to the dark valley of looking at *other* people's tragedies and thinking, *well, they must have done something to deserve that*... Yet Jesus says, *nope*.

Luke's gospel alludes to a couple current events which, though the details have been lost to history, at that time were significant enough that Jesus and his contemporaries all seem to know about them. One was definitely a tragedy of human origin: Pilate ordered an act of state violence against a group of Galileans while they were worshiping at the temple. We mostly remember Pilate for his passive injustice, washing his hands and failing to exonerate Jesus, even though he knew Jesus was innocent. But here Pilate proves his capacity for active evil in a violation of sanctuary that recalls to our modern minds egregious acts like the government of El Salvador murdering Archbishop Oscar Romero while he was celebrating mass. The other tragedy Jesus mentions is the collapse of a tower, either the result of an earthquake or faulty construction, which killed eighteen people. Jesus challenges the implication that the victims in either of these tragedies were somehow responsible for their own demise. *Do you think that because they suffered this way they were worse sinners than the others?* The fact that Jesus

asks the question suggests that the crowds *had* assumed these victims were particularly sinful... and by extension, that they who had survived or avoided these tragedies were doing a pretty good job of obeying God's law.

Jesus says no, these victims weren't any worse than anyone else. But Jesus also says, unless you repent, you will perish like they did. Those who had suffered these tragedies were not being punished by God for their sin; Jesus is clear about that. Yet the mortality rate is still 100%, and the sinfulness rate is still 100%. Maybe the conditions won't be as gruesome as Pilate's massacre or being crushed by a falling building, but all those to whom Jesus spoke, and all of us still, have a limited amount of time on this earth. Jesus tells us to use that time to repent, that is, to realign our lives with God's commandments. Living closer to how God tells us to live does not guarantee us more time, or better time, or a gentler end to our time, but it is what we're supposed to do with whatever time we've got. Jesus tells this crowd and us to repent to remind us that we're not any less sinful than anyone else, even if we haven't experienced their same tragedy. We need that reminder, because when we start thinking that every instance of suffering is a punishment or even just a consequence of sin, we become more judgmental, more self-righteous, more arrogant, and we become less charitable, less empathetic, less responsible to our communities. It only takes one small step to go from blaming victims for whatever they are suffering to blaming victims for the suffering we inflict on them.

Jesus further explains in the form of a parable: a vineyard owner wants to cut down a fig tree that hasn't produced any figs, but his gardener persuades him to wait one more year, to see if more care and attention will make it bear fruit. Who seems like the good guy in that story? The owner who showed no patience for the tree and was ready to cut it down or the gardener who wanted to take a little extra time and spend a little extra effort to help it flourish? What was the very first job God gave human beings? To tend and keep the Garden. We were not given the job of deciding who deserves to be cut down. God has been patient with us, treated us with grace, and given us people in our lives to tend to us so that we can bear the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. A good place to start is not judging that fruit in others but doing a little self-reflection on our own branches. When we are tempted to mistake ourselves for the vineyard owner, may God make us better gardeners so that we can tend to others with the patience, love, and grace that was first shown to us.