

“The Better Choice”

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Every night I am shocked by the graphic images of the devastation on the Ukraine shown on our major national television news networks. One recent image etched in my brain and I just can't shake it: is that of a young woman holding her two year old son: she is weeping as she tells the world that she has no food, no shelter, all the while over her shoulder we can see a portion of the apartment building where she lived collapsing behind her, the result of a menacing attack by Russian planes. In utter agony she struggles to say in broken English: "Why? We haven't done anything wrong. What did we do to deserve this?" There is no answer to her question and I have to look away.

Pick up a newspaper in any given week and you will find a report on some catastrophic tragedy somewhere. Only the locations change. Tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and horrendous road accidents--all of them wreaking havoc and altering lives. In every one of those deaths, families or loved ones grieved...in every one. And at some level, every one of those grieving people probably asked the same question: "Why?" It just doesn't seem fair. What had any of those folks done to deserve such tragic deaths?

In Jesus' day, there was no question about fairness. The assumption was that disease, suffering, and death bore a direct correlation with human sinfulness: the greater the sin, the more likely the misfortune. And to some degree, like it or not, we still think this way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in hopes that we can change what we are doing and so *stop* whatever has gone (or is going) wrong. What this tells us is that we are less interested in truth than consequences, What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives.

Surely you are not surprised by what I say! It was no different in Jesus' time. People longed to understand and control misfortune. So the crowds asked Jesus about the Galileans slain by Pilate, and they wondered about those who were killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed. What had those people done to deserve their fate? Might those tragedies have been prevented?

Jesus knows what they are thinking; and we have to say that, at first, he seems less than pastoral in his response:

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

Jesus does not really argue with the popular equation of sin and death. What he seems to want to emphasize is that death is always close and not necessarily controllable or explicable. Death happens, he says. It can happen when you're praying. It can happen when you're standing under a wall. It can catch you by surprise. And though you might *intend* to repent of sin at the end of your life, what's to say you'll have the time to do so? Jesus sounds less compassionate than we expect he would be; but Jesus is not aiming to comfort the crowd; he wants to challenge them:

... Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not necessarily to blame. Bad things happen to good people all the time. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.[2]

To make that point, Jesus tells a parable. It is not exactly a warm and fuzzy parable. In fact, it is a parable that underscores God's judgment and the need for repentance. He tells the story of a fig tree that is not producing and how the landowner has grown impatient with its inability to bear fruit. He proposes cutting the tree down. But the gardener argues for a one-year reprieve. Let me work with the tree for one more year, he asks, and then, if it does not produce fruit, we can cut it down. Here is a parable of God's justice in conversation with God's mercy. Can you see that that Jesus is the gardener, isn't he. He refused to give up on those who are living in the vineyard. Maybe the vineyard is the whole earth. Maybe it's the church. Maybe it's your life and mine. Jesus isn't giving up on any of us--you, me, the church, the whole earth. There's hope in this parable--don't cut the tree down. But there's also urgency--give me one more year.

"Why the war on the Ukraine people, it's elderly, it's children?" we ask. "Why did this happen to them? Why do and does this happen?" Bad and good things happen all the time. The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when Jesus was put upon the cross. The more crucial question is, in all circumstances of joy and pain, can you trust God to be God? Can you love God without linking such love to the good or bad things that come your way in life?

There are no easy answers to life's tough questions. The Church of Jesus Christ is not built upon easy answers. Instead, it is built upon a singular recognition that in the presence of the God we know in Christ we get a God whose love in our lives challenges and enables us to live without all the answers, a God who is willing to dig around our hearts, patiently encouraging us toward repentance and faithfulness and fruitfulness. We get a God who has given God's whole life to us, so that we might come to learn how to give our lives to God more fully.[7] A God who says "step back and get a look of the big picture just Beyond what's fair, and that seems to me to be a pretty good deal when you think about it.

O God, our source and our ultimate destination, give us such confidence in your grace that we may live fully, unafraid, turning toward you day by day by day...until we bear your fruit. Amen.