

St. Andrew's Church - March 7, 2010

Sermon "When Bad things happen" - The Rev. Douglas Kendall

*This is the written text I used for the sermon on this Sunday.
I generally stick pretty close to the written text... but not always.
Feel free to email me with any thoughts or questions. Doug
rev.doug.kendall@gmail.com*

Lord God
May the words of my mouth,
and the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts,
be acceptable to you, our God and our salvation.
AMEN

Do you ever wonder what is going on in our world?
Earthquake in Haiti and tens of thousands killed,
A week ago another earthquake in Chile.
Tsunami's and flooding around the world.
Not to mention the human atrocities.
The Sudan, Israel and Palestine,
Iraq and Afghanistan... and the list goes on.

Why them?
Why is it, with all of these natural disasters,
and we in Canada have remained almost untouched?
Oh sure we can remember the ice Storm of 98,
Or the Red river flooding,
But it seems nothing on the scale of what we see around the world.
Why do others suffer and we do not?

Are we better people than others around the world,
and that is why they suffer while we in Canada on our own soil, live in comfort?
Are they more sinful than we are, and that is why they suffer and we do not?
Where is the justice in all of this?
Where is God in all of this?

It is a little difficult for us to see God being behind these catastrophes...
or is it?
Is it possible that God is trying to tell us something in these tragedies?
Is it possible that God is punishing people for their sins
through earthquakes and natural disasters?

That may sound a little harsh, but for most of the history of our world,
including large portions of the Old Testament,
that was the way people understood their relationship with God.
And to be honest,
even today that is the way many people see their relationship with God.
If you are good God rewards you, if you sin, God punishes you.

How often do we think this way as well at some level,
trying to find meaning in the midst of other people's suffering and difficulty.

Well this was the a similar situation Jesus was confronted with.
There had been a tragic murder of Galileans
while they were in the very act of worshipping God.
While they were offering their animals for slaughter and sacrifice,
Pilate sent soldiers to slaughter and sacrifice the people too.
Why were those people killed, and others were not?
They just happened to be the ones making their sacrifice at that moment.
A few minutes earlier or later, and it would have been different people.

Why was it those specific people who were killed?
Some people came to Jesus with that very question.
Our scripture readings says,

***"At that very time there were some present who told him
about the Galileans whose blood
Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.***

He asked them,

***"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way
they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"***

Well many of the people in the crowd would have been thinking "yes".

That is the way things work.

God punishes the sinful and rewards the righteous.

If those people died, they must have been more sinful.

And Jesus answer...

"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Jesus turns it around on the people asking the question.

It is not about whether those people were sinners or not,
it is about the people asking the question.

"...unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

It is easier to look at other people and talk about their sins in the abstract
Than it is to look at our own lives.

What does Jesus mean, we will perish like those people?

It almost sounds like Jesus is saying,

If you do not repent, God will send Pilate's soldiers against you,

It ***almost*** sounds like that is what Jesus is saying... but.

Jesus continues...

***"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?"***

Jesus has already used Galilean's as an example,

now he is using people of Jerusalem.

Jesus first example was a human act of evil against other humans,

this example is an apparent accident.

***Are those who died in the tower falling incident
worse offenders or sinners than others?***

Is it because of their sins that they died?

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

What can Jesus mean by these words.

They sound like words of judgment

What is Jesus saying and what isn't he saying?

First of all he is saying that those people who died,

whether they were Galileans or residents of Jerusalem,

whether it be because of natural disaster or accident,

or even the actions of evil human beings,

they did not die because they were any more sinful than other people.

Why did they die then?

Jesus doesn't say.

As frustrating as it may be to us, Jesus does not answer the question "Why?"

What he does do is turn the light from looking outward at others and their lives,
and focuses it in on us and our lives.

Jesus then immediately goes on to tell a parable.

We would expect it to be a parable about judgment and repentance,
but it is not.

It is about a gardener and cutting down a tree.

This parable over the years has been looked at over and over again,
it has been pushed and prodded and interpreted and reinterpreted,
looking for all the symbols in it, looking for the meaning.

What does each aspect of the parable represent?

What does it mean that a fig tree was planted in a vineyard?

What is the significance of three years?

Is it a reference to the length of Jesus ministry?

Who is the gardener in the parable? Who is the master?

Who is the fig tree? What does the manure or fertilizer represent?

Here are a few answers to some of those questions.

First of all apparently it was not uncommon to plant other trees in with vineyards,
and fig trees were very common.

Second of all, apparently it takes three years for a fig tree to go from a seedling
to producing figs,
so that is not entirely out of place.

Third of all, we always need to remember
that parables are not meant to be exact allegories.

If we spend all of our time trying to figure out
what each aspect of the story represents,
we may miss the real point.

In this parable the master wants to see results,
and without results there will be judgment.

The tree has produced no fruit, it should be cut down.

Without fruit the tree will be cut down.

and the master would like to see it cut down now.

The gardener intercedes on the side of patience and mercy,
at least for a time.

Not indefinitely, but for a time.

***'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.
If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'***

One more year of grace.

And in that time the gardener is not going to ignore the fig tree,
he is going to care for it and nurture it and fertilize it.
to do everything he can to help it to bear fruit.

Fruit worthy of the master's soil and patience, and the gardener's efforts.

This parable is about grace and mercy.

After Jesus talking about judgment,

and the urgent need for repentance,

he ends with a parable about his and God's patience and mercy.

Our world seems to be out of control sometimes.

We see horrendous things that people do to each other
we see natural disasters and accidents that take the lives of thousands.

At times in the midst of it all,

in trying to make sense of these experiences we witness,

it is tempting to put it all into an simple framework we can understand.

If we are good, God will reward us,

if we sin, God will punish us,

therefore these terrible things we see,

must be God's punishment for those people's sins.

Jesus says,

"No, I tell you..."

It is not about God punishing people with horrendous acts,

It is not about them and their sins.

It is about patience and mercy from God.
There is tender and gentle care
to bring people to the point of bearing fruit
worthy of our master and the gardener...

But how does the story end?
Does the tree get cut down or not?
Does the tree produce figs the next year or not?
The story is incomplete.
But it is incomplete because we have to finish the story ourselves.
We are the fig trees.

Have we borne fruit or not?
Perhaps the gardener is still coaxing us along.
Perhaps all we need is a little more fertilizer,
a little more care to make us bear fruit worthy of the master.
What does my life say about who I am and what my priorities are?
The good news of the gospel is, the story is not over yet.
The tree is still growing and changing every day.

May God who is ever merciful bless us this day and every day,
In the name of the father, Son and Holy Spirit, AMEN.