

Sermon – Luke 13:1-9
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3 Lent – Year C
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“Incidents and Accidents”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. My bracket, if not quite busted, is in serious disrepair. But that hasn't stopped me from enjoying March Madness. The men's NCAA basketball tournament has been entertaining so far, even though my alma mater once again failed to even make the tournament. We've produced four U.S. presidents but can't find five guys who can play basketball. So, I cheer for my home state Badgers and whatever underdog is playing at the moment. Like the rest of the country, I've been caught up in the story of the St. Peter's Peacocks, the plucky squad from a Jesuit school in New Jersey that has already punched its ticket to next week's Sweet Sixteen. Having never heard of them a few hours earlier, I found myself cheering for them passionately as they took on, and finally took down, mighty Kentucky. It took overtime to get the job done, but in the end, they were celebrating an upset for the ages. I was enjoying it, too, until the camera cut away to a young boy in the stands. Decker out in Kentucky blue, he stood there with tears rolling down his cheeks, dreams dashed, as his mother sought to console him. Yes, it was great to see St. Peter's win, but my heart went out to that kid. While it's just a game, the pain is real. And it's just not that much fun to see people suffer.
2. Whether we like to see it or not, there is no shortage of suffering in the world. My television screen has shown me worse than disappointed basketball fans in these recent days, as we continue to see images from Russia's war against

Ukraine. Children who should be struggling with nothing worse than disappointment at the outcome of a game are instead targeted by bombs and displaced from their homes. Why, we continue to wonder, is such a tragedy happening in the first place, and how do we respond? While there is neither rhyme nor reason to this war, at least we know the cause. Putin bears the blame. With other forms of suffering, it is not always so easy to see. Why, we cry out, has this diagnosis, this misfortune, this disappointment come upon me? Us? The ones we love?

3. The question of suffering is front and center in our gospel reading today. Some in the crowd tell Jesus of a grisly incident that unfolded at the Temple. Some Galileans, perhaps known to Jesus from his old neighborhood, were offering sacrifices when Pilate, that petty Putin-tate, had them murdered, mingling their blood with that of the animal sacrifices. It was the act of a terrorist, but in their attempt to understand such evil, the people imagined that it was somehow the fault of the victims. They must have been worse sinners than others for such a thing to happen. While this worldview is a bit foreign to us, it was not uncommon in Jesus' day, and it does have a certain appeal. If bad things happen to bad people, well, as least they're getting what they deserve. And at least we have some control of the world around us. If we're good, or at least better than *them*, good things will happen to us. Jesus isn't having it, and he goes on to mention another tragedy, this one without a bad guy behind it. In Siloam, a construction project has seemingly gone awry, resulting in a collapsing tower that killed eighteen people when it fell. Did these people have it coming, Jesus asks? Did they get what they deserved? Is God in the business of knocking over buildings to take out sinners? No, Jesus says. God is not in the business of toppling towers or working through murderers. God didn't kill those people in the Temple; Pilate did. And as for the tower? Sometimes in this broken world things fall down.

4. Jesus tells the people that these victims were no worse than them. More to the point, the people speaking to Jesus are no better than those who died. If everyone were going to start getting what they deserved, there'd be a lot more falling towers. But God doesn't cause such suffering. Sometimes we can identify the cause of suffering; sometimes our "whys" go unanswered. So perhaps Jesus is inviting us to ask a different question. Instead of why, what? In the face of suffering, what are we to do? Jesus tells us plainly: Repent! To repent is not simply to regret what we've done, but to change directions. To turn from our sin toward God. Speculating about the sins of others gets us nowhere; it is our sin that needs to be dealt with. Repent! Turn to God. We do so not to earn God's favor or avoid suffering, but because Christ calls us, in our joys and in our sorrows, to return to God. Fred Craddock writes about our wonderings on the whys of suffering: "Jesus rejects such attempts at calculation not only because they are futile but also because they deflect attention from the primary issue: the obligation of every person to live in penitence and trust before God, and that penitent trust is not to be linked to life's sorrows or life's joys. Life in the kingdom is not an elevated game of gaining favors and avoiding losses."

5. In the midst of suffering, both in the lives of those around us and in our own lives, we turn to God. For God is not the cause of suffering but the One who joins us in our suffering. What change does this bring? What does this look like? It looks like the bearing of fruit upon once-barren tree limbs. Trees bear fruit not for themselves but so that others might be fed; so that others would flourish. We bear fruit to care for others, even if we continue to suffer. Perhaps you saw a picture of Olga, a young mother being treated for wounds in Kyiv. The image shows her, head bandaged and bloody, cradling her baby at the breast. She had used her own body to protect the child as the Russians shelled her neighborhood. This young woman reminds us of last week's Mother Hen. She also reminds us that while we do not choose our suffering

or understand why it's happening, we can respond by bearing fruit for the sake of those around us.

6. If the "what" of suffering is repentance and fruit bearing, we are pushed beyond that question to another: Who? Ultimately, we need to know not *why* suffering happens, but *who* will save us. The answer is Jesus, and Jesus only. It is Jesus who is both the gardener who cares for us and the tree that is cut down in our place. Left to our own devices, we would remain barren, lifeless. Jesus, who goes into the earth so that we would be fed and nourished. Jesus, whose lifeblood now enlivens our limbs. Jesus, whose Spirit makes us to bear fruit for the world around us. Jesus, who teaches us not to dwell too long on why people are suffering but instead to help them. Jesus, who is with us in our suffering, encouraging us to remember that the pain we experience will not last forever. Jesus, who never gives up on us but gives himself up for us. Make no mistake, this grace is not what we deserve. But God, thank God, isn't interested in giving us what we deserve. Instead, God gives us Christ, who teaches us to give our lives to God and live our lives for others. In Christ and for his sake, we may still suffer, but we suffer with a hope that does not disappoint. God, we sometimes say, won't give us more than we can handle, but that's not quite right. God, Paul writes to the church in Corinth, won't give us more than *God* can handle; God will provide a way through Christ, who makes a way through death into everlasting life. In that hope, turn to Christ and bear fruit. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.