

Sacred Sanctuary [Text - Luke 13:1-9]

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Because of today's advanced communications, you and I receive stories of tragedy and heartbreak with remarkable speed. As a result, it sometimes feels as if terrible things are happening all the time. We barely begin to process the horrible Mosque shootings in New Zealand, when we're informed of the deadly cyclones killing hundreds and displacing thousands in southern Africa. The truth is, that in a world of 7 and-a-half billion people, the likelihood of something bad happening to someone - somewhere - is virtually certain! So, while you and I gather here to proclaim the *Good* News that Jesus brings, we often do so against the backdrop of the recent *bad* news that Life brings. Yet in a way, this is fitting; because any faith-system that doesn't take into account Life's tragedies, is woefully incomplete. And to proclaim a faith in Jesus Christ, without addressing the reality of his own suffering and death, is both disjointed and delusional.

In this morning's New Testament reading, some people come-up to Jesus and tell him that the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, has "mingled the blood of Galileans with the blood of their sacrifices." In other words, Pilate has these Galileans killed while they're in the center of the Jerusalem Temple, presenting their prayers and offerings to the Holy One. This - and *any* - senseless slaughter in a sacred sanctuary, is certainly hard to fathom. It's also hard to know for sure why these people are telling Jesus this news. Maybe they're trying to warn him - a Galilean himself - to stay away from Jerusalem. Or, perhaps they're trying to get Jesus fired-up, so he'll rally the people, storm into Jerusalem, and overthrow those murderous Romans.

When he's told about this mass murder, Jesus is already on his way to Jerusalem. Yet he doesn't respond by fearfully retreating; or by fiercely ranting against the Romans. Instead, he faithfully continues his journey, fully recognizing the real possibility that *his* blood and his life may also be sacrificed there. Nevertheless, Jesus moves forward, determined to teach and to show that Divine Compassion doesn't hold back! It is intended for *all* people - even those who would seek to do him harm! So regardless of how the religious authorities attack him; in spite of the threats of Roman officials, Jesus moves forward with a Divine message of love, forgiveness and grace. It's a message of *Good* News, in spite of the *Bad*; a proclamation of Life, in the face of Death. It's a tremendously powerful *sign*: that Divine Compassion can overcome the power of hatred and violence, ignorance and fear.

I think it's interesting, that in response to this news of those Galileans being killed, Jesus brings-up yet *another* tragedy that recently rocked Jerusalem - when the tower of Siloam collapsed, and crushed eighteen people to death. It's as if Jesus is trying to *make* us confront one of Life's toughest question: "What do we do when senseless suffering comes crashing-down upon us?" That's a question all of us face, at one time or another. So this morning, I'd like us to use this reading to help us grapple with Life's senseless pain and suffering, tragedy and death.

The first thing to note, is Jesus' clear and emphatic assurance, that when tragedy does strike, it is *not* some kind of "punishment" from God! "Do you think these Galileans suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? I tell you **no**...or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you **no**...but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Jesus says that suffering, pain and death are not signs of an angry or judgmental God; but they *can* be a sign and a stimulus for personal reflection on what is truly important in our lives. The truth is, we will *all die*! The human mortality rate remains constant: 1 death per person! The question, therefore, isn't whether we will *die*; but rather, how shall we choose to *live*? In those terrible times, when pain and loss, suffering and death come crashing into our lives, one positive thing that can also come, is a much clearer focus on what is truly important to us. It *is* a time to "repent" - which means that we readjust our thinking and our acting; that we let-go of those things we no longer find valuable, so that we can embrace those things and people of genuine worth. The Holy One does not *afflict* us with bad things, Jesus declares; yet the Holy One can *inspire* us - breathe into us, the spirit and strength we need to overcome those bad things that are a natural part of Life.

The Tower of Siloam collapsed because of poor construction, not some devious Divine plan to punish those who just happened to be there. Those Galileans were slaughtered in the temple because of a bad Roman Governor, or bad sword-control laws; not as an act of *God* to punish bad Galileans. So Jesus, the good and wise Galilean rabbi, sets the record straight on this crucial point: the Holy One does not *cause* Life's traumatic and tragic events; *however*, the Holy One truly is present - with us and for us - in those tragic and traumatic times.

The way in which that Divine Presence is experienced, is most often through the presence of other people - those who are willing to stand beside us, to comfort and support us in our darkest times of pain and despair. But sometimes, it's in the isolation of our inner anguish that the voice of Divine Peace whispers to us that - somehow, in time - things *will* get better; and that Life's Story is far from finished. Even in the midst of Life's storms and tragedies, there can still be some surprisingly hopeful signs - like a rainbow, signifying that the worst is over; or a Cross, which reminds us of the depth of Divine Love; or an Empty Tomb, which signals that the best is yet to come.

As Jesus moves toward Jerusalem, all signs indicate that he is heading directly into his own time of tragedy, suffering and death. Yet as the Gospel proclaims, even then - *especially* then - the Holy One is fully present to faithfully carry Jesus through the darkness, into the light of a glorious new day.

Here's the bottom line: There is no place on earth that is completely safe. Even a sacred sanctuary can become a place of vicious violence. And no matter how many

guns we carry, or weapons we stockpile, or walls we build, we cannot insulate ourselves from Life's dangers, problems, or pain. So rather than listening to all the false promises of fear-mongering politicians, we need to trust in these two faithful promises of our Divine Source: First, that the loving and gracious path which Jesus walks, is the best way to find genuine peace, joy, and wholeness. And second, that while the troubles and tragedies of this world *will* pass-away, the Divine Light and Love which is a part of us all, will endure throughout the ages. This is the Good News that gives us hope!