

One More Year

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Text: Luke 13:1-9

In the 1970's television series "Maude," the title character, played by the incomparable Bea Arthur, had a favorite retort when she was exasperated by something her husband would say or do. "God'll get you for that, Walter," she would sneer as she gave her hapless husband her one-of-a-kind withering look. Even without the laugh track, it was a funny line because it made fun of how we sometimes think about God, as a kind of cosmic servant who acts the way we think or wish God should act, because that's the way we would behave. In such a worldview, there is no question of why bad things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people, and bad people deserve what they get. If you do something wrong, God will "get you" for it. After the fact, your only job is to figure out what it was that you did wrong.

What is funny in a sitcom isn't always funny in real life, though. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, one of our country's most listened to TV preachers opined that the horror of 9/11 wasn't the work of people who were demented by a twisted view of religion, but rather was God's payback for a host of things that God didn't like in our society: feminism, liberalism, homosexuality, divorce, etc., etc. In other words, God was just waiting to "get us" for these things. That same preacher later suggested that the people of Haiti were responsible for the earthquake that destroyed so many lives and so many homes in that island nation. They had made a pact with the devil, he said, and God was "getting them" for it.

While we may scratch our heads in wonder, or anger, at such ideas—at least I hope that we do--there is something in our human nature that wants to figure out God's will, to make sense out of the chaotic way in which the world seems to operate. A mother grieving the loss of her child in a tragic accident, a house fire, told me that she was wracking her brain to figure out what she had done to bring such a disaster on her and her family. When I tried to tell her that I didn't believe that God goes around pulling triggers or

pushing over buildings or setting fires to punish people, it was as if her world disintegrated around her. She had her explanation—even if she couldn't figure out what it was that she had done. She knew, just knew, that she had done something to anger God, to anger God so much that he had snatched away the pride and joy of her life. And there I was, upsetting her strangely reassuring worldview, a worldview that was somehow helping her to get through her personal tragedy by blaming herself.

This expectation that we can make sense of such things runs deep. In our scripture reading for the day from Luke's gospel, Jesus talks about two events about which we know nothing other than what these few short sentences of the Gospel say about them. The first had to do with the cruelty of Jesus' eventual executioner, Pontius Pilate. Apparently, in retaliation for something that some people from Galilee had done, perhaps an act of Jewish rebellion against Rome, Pilate had seen to it that Galilean blood had been mixed in with holy sacrifices to God. It's an unspeakable act when you think about it. Not only had some people suffered a doubtlessly anguished death, but their blood had been mixed in with the ritual sacrifices made to God thus causing pain and disgust among those who had unknowingly participated in a subsequent act of worship in which the blood of the innocents had been consumed.

The second event had nothing to do with human cruelty, but was more akin to what we call "natural disasters," what the insurance companies call, unfortunately, "an act of God." A tower had fallen and killed a number of people. Perhaps there was an earthquake; or perhaps it was a case of shoddy construction.

In both instances—the first having to do with evil, with human cruelty like 9/11, and the second with seemingly random misfortune, like earthquakes and wildfires—in both instances there were apparently people around like that televangelist who were only too eager to ascribe these disasters to the will of God. "Do you really think that those Galileans whom Pilate executed were worse sinners than other Galileans who escaped their horrible fate?" Jesus asked. You can almost hear the incredulity in his voice. "And those people who were crushed by that falling tower—were they somehow worse than all those innocent bystanders who weren't crushed in that tower's collapse?" A contemporary way of putting it would be, "Do you think that the people of Venezuela, who are oppressed by one of the worst dictatorships in the world, are less righteous than their neighbors in, say, Colombia? Or, do you think

that the people of Haiti, the poorest people in the western hemisphere, were more deserving of their succession of natural disasters than the people of the United States, the richest people in the world?”

“No,” says Jesus. And perhaps we say, “Whew.” No more agonizing over whether the bad choices we’ve made in our lives victimized that family member, or prompted God to “get us” with that terrifying disease. Whew.

But just as we’re breathing that sigh of relief, Jesus goes on to say, “But unless you repent, you will all die just as they did.” It almost feels like a bait and switch. Jesus holds out the assurance that we aren’t responsible for the horrible things that may have happened, or will happen, to us or to our loved ones, but then he goes on to tell us that unless we turn around, unless we repent, we’re still going to experience some kind of death in life.

So, which is it, Jesus—assurance or condemnation? When Jesus refuses to make a link between sin and suffering, he isn’t absolving us of responsibility for shaping our own destiny. He’s saying that while God doesn’t punish us for our sins, we may very likely be punishing ourselves when we lead empty and self-centered lives. “Don’t blame God,” Jesus says. “Repent, turn your lives around. You may not be able to avert all the terrible things that can happen to people, but while you live, you can really live.”

It’s a question of the difference between guilt and responsibility. Guilt is a useless and unproductive emotion. It’s the flip side of pride. Overweening pride is a sin because it leads us to live with the illusion that the good things in life are all traceable back to us, to our virtue or our skills, rather than to God, who is the source of all goodness. Overpowering and paralyzing guilt is a sin because it suggests that we are uniquely bad, uniquely unworthy of forgiveness. Both pride and guilt place us at the center of our universe, displacing God and denying God’s love and goodness. The first pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, my former church, Harry Emerson Fosdick, compared paralyzing guilt to a stuck car horn. It indicates that something is wrong, but then it drives us crazy when we can’t shut it off.

The remedy for guilt is responsibility. While guilt immobilizes; responsibility energizes; while guilt maims our souls, responsibility gives them life. The repentance Jesus is talking about isn’t the sackcloth

and ashes of remorse; it's taking responsibility for our own lives, exercising our ability to respond: response-ability. That, Jesus tells us, is the way of life.

So Jesus gives us the assurance that God doesn't "get us" for our sins, but he warns us that unless we repent, those sins will "get us," will deprive us of the life that God wants for us. Jesus assures, but then he disturbs. He gives, but then he takes away. But in the end, he gives. What makes our repentance possible is God's infinite patience and grace.

At the conclusion of today's reading, Jesus tells a parable about an unproductive fig tree. For three years, the owner of an orchard watched as a fig tree he had planted produced no fruit. All that attention, all that fertilizer, and still no fruit. "Cut it down," the owner told his gardener. "Why don't we give it one more year," the gardener replied. "Maybe next year it will bear fruit."

Pat and I have a kind of ritual disagreement about this time every year when we contemplate longingly what we will plant in our gardens a couple of months hence. The disagreement is about tomatoes. Almost every year, unaided by a greenhouse, our tomatoes never quite make it to red. One year in the fall, our garage was festooned by hanging branches of big bright green tomatoes because there had been too little sun during the summer, and because we had an early frost, and so we hoped against hope to salvage those precious tomatoes. Homegrown tomatoes after all, are so much better than the red cardboard tomatoes we buy, or don't buy, in the store. And so after each year's ritual discussion, we try, every year. We give it a chance every year, even if we hedge our bets with the little cherry tomatoes that do ripen and taste like candy after we pluck them, one by one, and pop them into our mouths.

One more year, one more chance. Jesus doesn't go around causing calamity for people who have made mistakes in life. Jesus actually isn't into karma, or divine retribution. Jesus is into salvation. With Jesus, there is always that one more year, always that one more chance. But the time allotted to us in this life isn't infinite. There may be one more year, but there will not be an endless succession of one more years. So, what about you during this Lenten season? Will this be the year when you accept God's gracious offer of life? Will this be the year when you decide to find new life by making the changes you need to make in the life you're leading now? Will this be the year when you bear fruit that is worthy of God's hopes and dreams for you? You have a chance, after all. Amen.