

## Lent 3C

March 7, 2010

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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Isaiah 55:1-9    Psalm 63:1-8    I Corinthians 10:1-13    **Luke 13:1-9**

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Why do bad things happen to good people? People have been asking this question for as long as people have been on Earth. There's even a book out that attempts to deal with this question.<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction to his book, Rabbi Harold Kushner admits that he had a very personal reason for writing it. His son, Aaron, was diagnosed with a very rare disease just after his third birthday. Rabbi Kushner's struggle with why such a horrible thing would happen to his child led him into a personal struggle. It led him to state, in the first sentence of the first chapter of his book, that "There is only one question which really matters: Why do bad things happen to good people?" He goes on to say that, "All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting."<sup>2</sup>

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This is the same sort of question that those who approached Jesus in the beginning of today's Gospel text ask. Apparently, some people came running up to where Jesus was speaking with the crowds to report the latest news: the Roman governor, Pilate, had murdered a bunch of Galileans who had come to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices.

The people's question upon hearing of this atrocity was a very natural reaction to such bad news: "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans that they had this suffering?" It's human nature to ask why bad things happen to good people. And it's also human nature to think that if something bad happened, they must have done something to deserve it.

That was certainly the thinking in Jesus' day. Bad things happen to bad people; good things happen to good people. If you're obedient, God will reward you; if you're disobedient, God will punish you. It's as simple as that.

Had Rabbi Kushner been around in Jesus' day, his book would have been very short indeed. Why do bad things happen to good people? The popular wisdom of Jesus' day said that bad things happen to you because you deserve it. You must have done something displeasing to God.

But how does Jesus respond in today's text? He says, "By no means!" Those Galileans who were murdered were no worse sinners than anyone else.

Hmmmm... this got the people to thinking. Well, if human-caused evil – in this case, Pilate murdering righteous, sacrifice-offering Galileans – didn't mean that those murdered men were worse sinners than others, perhaps natural catastrophes were a sign from God?

Jesus must have anticipated the question on their minds, for immediately he says, “Do you suppose that the eighteen people on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed, that they were worse sinners than all the people who live in Jerusalem?” Jesus immediately answers his own question: “By no means!” Those people who died when the tower fell on them were no worse sinners than anyone else.

Jesus’ further response to both questions reminds me of what Abigail Van Buren used to frequently tell writers to her “Dear Abby” newspaper column. She would respond with four simple letters: M-Y-O-B. “Mind your own business.”

It’s a fruitless exercise, Jesus says, to try to figure out why bad things happen to good people. Don’t go about trying to justify yourself, trying to establish your own innocence or righteousness. But be about your own business.

And what is our business? According to Jesus, our business is to repent, and to repent *now*. He says, “If you all do not repent, you all will similarly perish.”

With these simple words, Jesus points out that we are all sinners in need of repentance. And in repentance, in turning toward Christ and the mercy of God available despite our own sinful existence, we will receive life; we will not perish.

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Jesus goes on to tell a parable to explain how life is available to us through repentance. He likens us to a fig tree. He says we’ve been planted, but yet not

borne fruit by the time fruit was expected. The owner of the fig tree comes, only to find no fruit on the tree. But the gardener intercedes for the fig tree. He asks for mercy from the owner on behalf of the fig tree. He offers to tend the tree and fertilize it, in the hope that the tree may bear fruit in the coming year.

We presume that the owner of the tree agrees to be merciful, and allow the tree to be tended for another year. For we know that our owner, God, is a God of second chances. We trees have been given a second chance through the intercession of our gardener, Jesus.

We've been given a second chance through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We've been given the chance to return every day to our Baptism, for a reminder of the grace offered to us. We've been given the chance to be fed with the Word of God. We've been given a chance to physically partake of the food of Holy Communion, and to receive the gifts of grace and mercy freely offered to us.

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I'm reminded of a story once told about two women who were neighbors, one living above the other in an apartment building. The younger woman on the lower floor had done something of which she knew the old woman above would not be pleased. She kept trying to forget it, to put it aside, rather than going and admitting

her guilt. But finally her conscience got the best of her, and she went to the old woman above to apologize. Much to her surprise, the old woman responded with grace, saying, “I forgive you.” But the old woman also told her, “Don’t ever do it again.”

And the two women were reconciled.

Several months passed, and the young woman below found that she had unknowingly committed the same sin against her neighbor. She agonized. She wanted to go to her neighbor above and confess what she’d done, but she remembered the old woman’s words to her the last time this had happened. “Don’t ever do it again.”

Finally, not able to live with herself anymore, the young woman went to her neighbor above. “Let the chips fall where they may,” she thought, “But I’ve just got to tell her I’ve done it again.” Sheepishly she knocked at the old woman’s door. She admitted what she’d done. And again, the old woman responded with grace and said, “I forgive you.”

“How could this be?” the young woman thought. She admitted she’d been hesitant to even admit her fault, remembering what the old woman had said last time this happened. How could the old woman forgive her, when she’d told her before not to do it again?

The old woman simply chuckled and smiled at her. Putting her arm around the young woman, she said, “When I said, ‘I forgive you,’ I meant it. Like the Bible says, ‘I will remember your sin no more.’<sup>3</sup> I completely forgot what you had done. Every time is like the first time.”

And the two women were reconciled.

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Ours is the God of second chances. It’s a second chance to us who believe in the mercy of God through Jesus Christ. But it’s always a *first* with God.

I’m sure by now you all know that I particularly enjoy finding theological significance in movies. You might say it’s sort of a hobby for me. Well, I remember a particular scene from the 1991 movie “City Slickers” that really speaks to me. In this movie, Mitch (played by Billy Crystal) is taken to a dude ranch by his two best pals for his fortieth birthday. One night, one of his friends, Phil, breaks down, saying that he is almost forty years old, and he feels his life is a waste. To console him, Mitch reminds Phil that when they were kids playing ball, if the ball got stuck in a tree they would call, “Do over” – it would be as if the first try never happened. Mitch tells Phil that his life is a clean slate, a “do over.”

Taking up this idea of a “do over” in his book *No Wonder They Call Him Savior*,<sup>4</sup> Christian author Max Lucado, says:

Not many second chances exist in the world today. Just ask the kid who didn't make the Little League team or the fellow who got the pink slip or the mother of three who was dumped for a "pretty little thing." Not many second chances. Nowadays it's more like, "It's now or never." "Around here we don't tolerate incompetence." "Gotta get tough to get along." "Not much room at the top." "Three strikes and you're out." BUT wouldn't it be great if there were do overs...

A policeman stops you for speeding, you just tear up the ticket and say – "Thanks, Officer, but I'll be taking a do over today..." The bank says you bounced a check. "Do over," you say, "No problem," they say back... You get in an argument with a friend and you say something mean and cruel – "I think I'll be taking that do over now" – "Sure thing," they say... Fail a test, blow a presentation at work, invest in the wrong company, forget to send in your taxes – JUST take a do over.

"BUT LISTEN," he continues, "In the most important thing there is – our relationship with God – a do over is not a dream, it is a reality."

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So, getting back to the issue I raised at the beginning of this sermon... With all due respect to Rabbi Kushner, the question that really matters is not why bad things happen to good people. The ultimate question is: Why did a good man die? Why did the only completely innocent man who ever lived, Jesus Christ, have to die? The ultimate answer is: So that everyone might have the opportunity to be restored to relationship with God.

As we continue our Lenten journey, let us remember that ours is a God of second chances. God offers “do overs” to those who have received the gift of grace and mercy in Jesus Christ.

Is there something that has been weighing your heart down, some way in which you feel you’ve failed to bear the fruit that God intends for your life? Go to God. Ask for a “do over.”

Amen.

<1,866 words>

- 1 Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981).
- 2 Ibid., 6.
- 3 Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12; Hebrews 10:17
- 4 Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him Savior* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1993).