

Diane Jamison Fitch
Abington Presbyterian Church
March 24, 2019
Luke 13:1-9
A New Way

Why do bad things happen – and how do we make sense out of suffering and calamity? This is a question we are asking this week, as we mourn with New Zealand over the tragic death of 50 Muslims as they gathered for prayer and worship, and as flood waters continue to ravage Nebraska and other areas of the Midwest. How and why are these things happening?

Many years ago, when William Sloan Coffin was the senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City, his 21-year-old son Alex was killed in a tragic car accident. Alex was driving in a terrible storm; he lost control of his car and careened into the waters of Boston Harbor. The following Sunday, Dr. Coffin preached about his son's death. He thanked all the people for their messages of condolence, for food brought to their home, for an arm around his shoulder when no words would do. But he also raged; he raged about well-meaning folks who had hinted that Alex's death was God's will. "I knew the anger would do me good," he said.

Then he went on:

"Do you think it was God's will that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper...that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had too much to drink? Do you think it was God's will that there are no street lights along that stretch of the road and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?

Coffin later commented," For some reason I can't get it through people's heads that God doesn't run around pulling trigger fingers, clenching knives, turning steering wheels...The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died – but that when the waves closed in over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break." Pause ...

The text from Luke that I shared with you this morning also asks this same question: Why do bad things happen?

There were two terrible tragedies in Jerusalem, and those gathered around Jesus wanted to know if those in harms way had done something to deserve their fate. Was it their fault? Were they to blame?

Jesus answers his own question, "No, but ...

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

Jesus confirms that there is not a cause and effect explanation for these tragedies. Then he shares a parable to turn their attention toward their own lives instead of speculating about others.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

The gardener doesn't cut down the tree. Instead the gardener says, "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."

There is both urgency and hope in the gardener's words. "Give me a year--I'm not willing to give up on this tree. Let me dig around it, loosen the hard soil, and put manure on it."

There's hope in this parable--don't cut the tree down. But there's also urgency--give me one more year. And so it is for us – both hope and urgency in this season of Lent. Easter is coming, and what is it that we are called to do differently? In what way are we called to repent – to change our heart or our mind?

You may be called to Speak Up

My heart has been aching this week. Aching for the people of New Zealand. Aching for Muslims who are mourning and afraid. And so I want to tell you about Amy.

I have known Amy for 23 years – since she was in high school and I was a new pastor working in youth ministry in New York ... she is now married, with two young daughters, ordained in the Presbyterian Church and serving as a hospital chaplain in New Zealand. Amy is active on Facebook ... it's a great way for us to keep up with each other ... On Friday, as Muslims in New Zealand and around the world gathered for prayer and worship, Amy posted a photo of herself in a hijab – the headscarf worn by Muslim women as a sign of respect for their faith and God. Amy, ordained and Christian showed care and solidarity with her Muslim sisters and brothers by wearing a hijab. How do we do show our care?

Najeeba Syeed, a scholar of Interfaith studies, writes,

"My life depends on Christians announcing the good news AND that Muslims are not demonic worshippers of some foreign God. My life depends on Christians having those complex, emotionally exhausting conversations during the holidays with uncle Harry when he makes a derogatory remark. My life depends on you, as Christians, being willing to be uncomfortable in your own spaces and not being silent when someone says something Islamophobic."

You may be called to speak up.

Or You may be called to Listen

For so many of us, there are painful or seemingly unfair situations in our lives. They are hard or hurtful, and we seek relief and respite. There are times when we could turn our longing to God, or to scripture, that we might find comfort. It could be in prayer or in study. It could be alone or in a group. Take the time to listen to what God is asking of you. You may need to be quiet. You may need to be patient. Pay attention for God's voice.

You may be called to listen.

Or You may be called to Seek Peace

Last May I journeyed to Israel and Palestine with a group of mostly Presbyterian - clergy and laypeople – on a Mosaics of Peace trip. We met with all sort of people working toward peace, listened to stories and visited sites. One visit that stands out was to the Garden of Gethsemane. The garden is peaceful, and quiet in the midst of a turbulent city. It is a sanctuary! But the highlight of my visit was meeting the gardener. It happened by chance, and he told me a bit of his story. He is a Palestinian Christian. His father was the gardener before him. He seeks to maintain this place of beauty, and solitude and peace – as a testament to God's desire for peace in the land. And under one of the olive trees, rocks spell out the word "PEACE". His ministry is to tend to the garden, and to cultivate peace.

You may be called to seek peace.

In this season of Lent, be assured that God is the bearer of love, and God is waiting for us, and will nurture us along with BOTH hope and urgency.