

As an icebreaker activity, I have asked people to share the one question they want to ask God when they meet face-to-face

and about 80% of the time, the question has been the same.

Why suffering?

It seems to be THE universal question.

A question that the Hebrew people were used to answering in a particular way.

You see, at the time of Jesus, there was still a clear belief that suffering was a direct result of sin.

If someone was suffering, it directly correlated to some breach with God.

In Hebrew Scripture we hear it over and over again,
that suffering is about cause and effect.

Kind of the idea that bad things only happen to bad people.

Like poor Job.

Who was a righteous man who was afflicted with terrible suffering,
he lost his children, his health, his livestock.

And what did his friends do to encourage him?

They gave him all the reasons why he must deserve his plight.

And in Jesus' time, it was still prevalent.

Remember when the disciples saw the blind man, the first question they asked was:
who sinned ...he or his parents that this thing happened to him.

And the idea is not completely foreign even today.

Every time we deal with a major natural disaster there are those who want to go for the simple answer...

those who feel compelled to trace a cause and effect.

Pat Robertson's latest comments on the 700 club are just another example of this human need to answer the question of "why suffering"

instead of just admitting that there are things beyond the scope of our understanding,

he was quick to give an absolute answer

he was quick to place blame on the victims themselves.

I just keep wondering if Jesus was shaking his head saying,

"Do you think these Haitians were worse sinners than all the other people in the world because they suffered this way?"

In our Gospel lesson, the crowds come to Jesus with the same assumption.

They come with a report about a horrific event,

but Jesus knows that they do not come with compassion for the victims,

they instead come wanting Jesus to confirm that these Galileans must have deserved what they got.

But instead of confirming their interpretation,

Jesus turned it back on them.

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

I tell you no!

And just in case he didn't make a strong enough point, he gives them another example, an incident that they must have already known about.

Jesus says

you know that tower, the one in Siloam, that fell on those 18 people and killed them.

That had nothing to do with those 18 being any more sinful than anyone else.

Jesus tells them "it was an accident"

and then he turns it back on them.

And basically tells them,

"If your premise was true. If suffering comes as a result of sin,
then you are all doomed.

Jesus says, "Don't waste your time worrying about other peoples' sins.

Worry about yourselves."

Jesus discounts that God "caused" these peoples' deaths because they were worse sinners than anyone else.

In fact, Jesus reminds us that sin is sin.

And that we "all of us sin and fall short of the glory of God"

each of us needs to repent...to literally turn around,

not just once and done,

but every day.

The word repent in our text is in the present subjunctive case..

it literally means we need to "keep on repenting"

it is a life-long process,

a daily return to God.

Jesus seems very harsh here, saying if you don't repent, "you too would perish"

but he is not necessarily saying, that if we don't repent we will die an untimely death.

He's not saying that God will punish us with some natural disaster or tragic accident.

He is saying that if it was not for God's grace and mercy, we would all be separated and estranged from a relationship with God.

Jesus is rejecting the idea that suffering is a direct result of a person's level of sin.

Jesus tells us that we are all in the same boat.

All of us are sinful, yet, at the same time,

all of us are loved and forgiven for our short-falls because of what Jesus did for all humankind.

so if suffering is not a direct result of our sinfulness,

then where does that leave us?

It leaves us with unanswered questions

with deaths and accidents that make no sense

with suffering that doesn't seem fair,

with grief that has no clear explanation.

But we are also left with the promises of God,

We are left with the assurance:
that God is still in control of the future,
that God is with us in suffering
that God's mercy far outweighs our sin;
that our God is a God of second chances;

We are left with the promise that because of Jesus' willingness
to suffer, there will come a day when all suffering and pain will come to an end.

And in the meantime,
we are left with one another,
with brothers and sisters in Christ,
who walk with us through all the experiences of life,
both joy-filled and pain-filled.

That's why we are called to spread the good news of Christ,
not the news that if you have Jesus in your life you will not suffer,
but instead, if you have Jesus in your life, you will have the strength to endure what life brings until
that day when suffering will be no more.

And Jesus wants us to live each day prepared and ready for that day.

Amen

The story of the fig tree is open ended, just like our lives. We don't know what happened after the gardener had been given a second chance. The good news here is that the fig tree wasn't cut down. That is because God is more interested in trees having an opportunity to bare fruit rather than be destroyed.