

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Open the newspaper or watch the news on any given day and you'll read about or see ugly and tragic events similar to those described in today's Gospel. These two that I'm about to share with you came from last Sunday's *Indianapolis Star*, both from the front page of the "USA Today" section:

In Kalamazoo, Michigan, Jason Dalton, a forty-five year old married father of two children, shot and killed six people and wounded two others in incidents in three separate locations in that city.

Typically, I would have said that he is "alleged" to have done these things, but later it was reported that Dalton, who grew up in nearby Hendricks County, Indiana, had admitted to the crimes after having been taken into custody.

It was also reported that in Syria on Sunday, a double attack carried out by the Islamic State resulted in more than one hundred people dying. The first attack was a double-car bombing in the central Syrian city of Homs, causing the deaths of fifty-seven people.

The second attack was staged at a vegetable market outside the city of Damascus, where bomb blasts killed fifty people and injured two hundred, as reported on Syrian state television.

As we heard in today's Gospel, Jesus uses two events of untimely death to show that everyone will die, but not everyone has to perish. In the first event, some Galileans had come to the temple to offer sacrifices. They were killed on Pilate's order, and he had their blood "mingled with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1).

While today we might ask, "Why would God allow such a thing to happen?" the first question in Jesus' day was likely, "What sin had they committed to bring about this terrible tragedy?"

And Jesus addressed that question when he asked, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" And Jesus answered, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (Luke 13:2, 3).

In the second tragedy in today's Gospel, eighteen people died when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Jesus asked his audience, "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (Luke 13:4, 5).

Again, while we might ask why God allowed these things to happen, the people in Jesus' day asked what great sin the victims had committed to deserve such a death. But Jesus didn't answer our question, and he didn't go deeply into the question on the minds of his original audience.

Instead, Jesus responded with a call to repentance. I think we can conclude that the "theme verse" for this whole section is the statement Jesus said twice: "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (Luke 13:3, 5).

In other places and other ways, Jesus tells us that sin (our own sin, the sins of others or the sinful nature of all humankind) does indeed have dire consequences, but not as punishment from God linked to particular events.

On another occasion, when seeing a blind man, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3).

While Jesus' words then serve as a reminder that we will all die and that the manner and time of our death are unpredictable, they also remind us that far more important than the manner of our death is how we live our lives.

And the most important part of that living is that each person repents, and sooner rather than later, and turns toward Jesus for eternal life.

Jesus, the master storyteller, then told his audience a parable about a barren fig tree. Many commentators believe that in this story, the owner of the vineyard represents God and the gardener represents Jesus.

There is also the belief that the tree could not produce fruit for the first three years after being planted. So somewhere between year four and year six, God was looking for fruit and found none. "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" (Luke 13:7).

Jesus, the gardener, replies, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down" (Luke 13:8-9).

In other words, Jesus was saying that there are second (and third and fourth and fifth ...) chances. But there will also come a time, even in God's love, that it will be too late to repent.

Life can be puzzling; life can be painful; at times, life can be downright cruel and ugly. At some point, many people, perhaps most people, eventually end up asking the "Why?" questions:

Why did this happen? Why did it happen to me? Why did God allow this to happen? Why did God cause this to happen? Why, God, why? Eventually, we recover; life gets back to some kind of routine, the "new normal," but the nagging questions still remain.

The search for answers to “Why?” has been going on for as long as humankind has walked the face of this planet. In our text, however, Jesus tells us there is another question we should be asking. That question is “What now, God?”

In this short passage in Luke, Jesus reminds us of our mortality. As we think about the death of others, we know how short and precious life is for all of us. And, in effect, Jesus tells us to ask “What shall we do now, God?”

Jesus’ answer to that question is that we should look carefully at our lives and see where we are in relation to eternity. Have we strayed away from our deep, trusting relationship with God?

Are we living a life of unrepentant sin? Are we going around holding grudges and hatred toward someone in our life? Are we living as if God and eternity don’t matter, and don’t even exist?

What now, God? Jesus encourages each of us to let the events of life, even the awful and unexpected tragedies of life, to become prompts for us to examine our lives in light of God’s grace, and in light of God’s ultimate judgment.

These events can be seen as signs from God that we can change. With God’s help, we can change and become new creations.

Seven years ago, in March 2009, a man jumped into the Niagara River, went over the falls, and miraculously survived the 180-foot plunge. But then he resisted rescue attempts before he eventually was pulled from the icy water to safety. He was one of only three people in history known to have survived such a jump.

But resisting rescue almost cost him his life. The rescue workers went to great lengths to overcome his resistance and they were finally able to pull him ashore.

Many of us feel like we’ve been plunged into the swirling waters of life and we may feel like we’re about to go under. Jesus offers us salvation. He offers his outstretched hand in the midst of everything swirling around us that would pull us down. Will we resist rescue, or willingly take his hand? What now, God?

God sent Jesus to this earth and to us for a reason. Jesus went to the cross for a reason. You may be hearing this sermon for a reason! Let the unexpected and troubling events of today point you to your Savior. If you’ve not already done so, take Jesus’ hand and repent. Do it now. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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