

meeting God  
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*Biblical Voices on God's Presence in the Face of Tragedy*

SESSION FOUR: May 4, 2010

## Un-connecting the Dots

Jesus' Teachings on Tragedy

*food for thought...*

### **Luke 13:1-5**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

### **John 9:1-7**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup>We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." <sup>6</sup>When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

### Learning the Wrong Lessons From History

While the teachings of the Law/Torah did promise divine blessing when Israel was faithful to the covenant, and divine chastisement when Israel was unfaithful, that was never meant to be a rigid, airtight system of karma where every individual good deed received a reward and every bad event was a punishment for sin. But after the experience of the exile, which God's people interpreted primarily as a divine punishment for their collective corporate sin, that was just the kind of system that many in post-exile Judaism assumed was in place. If the exile was punishment for national sin, then other tragedies *must* be punishments for individuals' sins, too. The wrong-headed thinking of Job's friends became the conventional wisdom for many, and they were convinced they had

### When Jesus Says "Hold Your Horses"

On several occasions in the Gospels, people come to Jesus and ask him to explain some tragic event, usually assuming that he will reinforce their assumptions of a system where every bad thing that happens is a direct punishment from God for a single, specific action. But as we heard this Lent from Luke, and also from the story of the man born blind in John 9, Jesus consistently halts that logic and forces people to un-connect the dots they have been connecting in their minds. Jesus denies that the victims of a massacre by Pilate or a tower's collapse were worse sinners than those who came to Jesus with airs of pious smugness. Jesus denies that the man's blindness was a punishment for his sin or his parents' sin. Jesus breaks their theological systems and religious assumptions apart and reveals that they were inadequate pictures of how God works. They will need a new understanding of how God operates in a world of tragedy.

### Turning Things Back To Us

In the story from Luke 13:1-5 in particular (see top left), Jesus turns the question back on the ones who came to him. "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did," Jesus says. In other words, "Hold your horses assuming that these people are in worse trouble than you, and worry about yourselves first." Rather than smugly looking down on the victims of a tragedy as detached third parties, they will have to look at their own lives. In a way, this is an extension of Jesus' teaching that we not judge our neighbors while hypocritically excusing ourselves from scrutiny—the whole business of picking specks out of our neighbors' eyes when we have logs in our own (Luke 6:41-42). We know better than to condemn others on our own authority, so it becomes awfully tempting to project our judging onto God and believe that God is punishing someone.

## Un-connecting the Dots: Jesus' Teachings on Tragedy

### Maybe Our Questions Are Wrong...Learning to Ask The Right Questions

C. S. Lewis offers the following insights that came out of the crucible of mourning his wife's death in his book *A Grief Observed*:

*"When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of 'No answer.' It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child; you don't understand.'*

*"Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask—half our great theological and metaphysical problems—are like that."*

Both of our primary biblical texts today say the same—people come to Jesus with questions that turn out to be nonsense questions. The underlying question brought to Jesus in Luke 13 is something like, *Aren't these victims of disaster worse sinners than those who did not die from a tragedy today?* And the question in John 9 is explicitly asked by the disciples: *Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* In both cases, Jesus cannot answer the question the way it is asked, because it is framed with a faulty premise, the same way it is impossible to answer, "Have you stopped beating your children?" with a simple "Yes" or "No" and not come across like a monster. So Jesus refuses to answer the nonsense questions that come to him, and instead turns his questioners' attention in another direction—onto askers' own sinfulness in the one case, and onto the presence of God in *healing* disease rather than *causing* it. Jesus knows he is being silent on the question of where to see God in the *cause* of these tragedies, because to him, those questions are wrongly framed from the outset. And instead, Jesus teaches us how to look for God in the *healing* of those maladies (*John 9:3*) and in the prospect of mercy (*Luke 13:6ff*, in the parable of the man with the barren fig tree).

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### The Good Silence

Perhaps it strikes us at first as a theological sleight-of-hand that Jesus never really *answers* the question of whether God can be said to have directly *caused* the blindness or the massacre of the Galileans or the collapse of the tower. But if C. S. Lewis is right, then Jesus' non-answers are the only option, really to questions that are nonsensical to begin with. So, we find ourselves again, much like Job at the end of his story, changed but without the answers we thought we were looking for. Just as Job never has it revealed to him that the devil was behind his suffering, and just as Job's friends prove to be friends only when they remain silent covered in dust and ashes with him, sometimes *silence* is the best starting place for us. At least an *honest* silence can be a place for healing to happen—the kind of silence that Lewis describes as the gaze from God that says "Peace, child; you don't understand" rather than the silence of a locked door.

For us as Christians who try to hold all three "grapefruits" (to go back to our recurring image)—(a) that God is *good*, (b) that God *reigns*, and (c) that *bad things*, even things contrary to God's good will, *happen*—it will require a certain kind of courage to offer that silence as part of our presence. Sometimes there are no good words, or at least no satisfying explanations. That is not fudging things—that is following the model of Jesus.

But this *good* kind of silence, this *peaceable* silence, will require the courage to admit "We don't know" sometimes why things happen the way they do. That will also mean that we do not try to *sell* our faith to others as a way to make sense of all human events. Christians do not have the curtain pulled back to us to reveal the inner workings of the universe, and Jesus never makes that promise to us. So if we are going to share the Good News of Jesus with the world, and not some other good news of our own invention, we will have to let go of our need to explain *why* this or that tragedy happened, and instead follow Jesus' direction to look at ourselves and our own sin honestly, and to learn to train our eyes to see God's presence in the healing of hurts and the wiping of tears, which as the Bible reminds us, is how our Story ends, after all.

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