

Who is Jesus?
Merciful Savior
Second in Lenten Series

by
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

March 13, 2022

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So 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?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The idea of spending these Sundays in Lent asking the question: *Who is Jesus?* was initially born of a collaborative conversation with my good colleague, Rebecca Kirkpatrick, about choosing texts for the Lenten Devotional Book. The passages chosen from the Gospel of Luke for the guide for home devotionals during Lent, present a variety of descriptive interactions with Jesus as he steadfastly makes his way toward Jerusalem. Each passage, in its own way, both asks and gives some answer to the question: *Who is Jesus?*

While I began to ponder a season of preaching on the topic, I must also say that in my thirty-five years of ministry, I cannot count the number of times this question has arisen. The question arises naturally during Bible Studies and classes, sometimes during an appointment with someone working through a crisis in faith, or simply in a casual conversation at the door after worship. Over the years, I've made note of how this question gets put into words, and I've saved those notes in one of my preaching file folders entitled "The Jesus Question."

It gets voiced in a lot of different ways such as: *I believe in God, as a creative and benevolent power in the universe, but I have trouble with Jesus. Or, I have a hard time figuring out how a first century Palestinian Jew became the Jesus we say we believe in today.* This one I wrote down about six months after I came to be your pastor back in 2013: *I liked worship better at Bryn Mawr when we didn't have an Affirmation of Faith because a lot of us don't believe what Apostles Creed says about Jesus.* And one of my favorites: *I'm good with God and the Holy Spirit but forget about Jesus; too hard to understand, too difficult. He asks more questions than he answers.*

Through the years I have written these comments down because some of them echo my own pondering curiosity *about Who Jesus Really Is.* I love their candid honesty, their sincerity, and frankly I appreciate their faithfulness in wrestling to understand who God is, and how the God of all creation both entered human history, and at the same time transcends it. We worship a God whose ways are revealed to us through

awe and wonder, through mystery, through experiences that are hard to pin down even as Jesus himself cannot ultimately be nailed down. And who, while he was on his way to the cross, raised questions about *Who He Is*.

As Martin Copenhaver, now retired president of Andover Newton Theological Seminary, found in his study of the gospels and claims in his book entitled *Jesus Is the Question*: Jesus was more than forty times as likely to ask a question as answer one directly, and he was twenty times as likely to offer an indirect answer as a direct one. ¹

Both of our texts from the 13th Chapter of Luke are case in point. The first one reads as if the people around Jesus may have been watching the horrifying pictures and film from the invasion of Ukraine we have been watching. They ask Jesus about tragic human suffering at the hands of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, likely referring to a massacre of a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. They ask Jesus why wondering if human sin might be a cause of suffering. No, Jesus says, not any more than the unforeseen collapse of a tower in Jerusalem which killed eighteen people in a tragic accident.

Both of these incidents saw people killed with little warning, but the common denominator is not a causal relationship with sin according to Jesus. Rather, it's the realization that life is precarious. The victims did nothing wrong, nothing that caused their deaths, and we must not equate terror and tragedy with divine punishment.

Our own New Testament scholar, Joshua Yoder, notes that Jesus doesn't even take the occasion of that question to condemn Pilate for his brutality; but rather, "he makes the tragedy an object lesson on the need for repentance."²

¹ Matt Skinner, Commentary on Luke 13:1-9, workingpreacher.org.

² Joshua Yoder, *Representatives of Roman Rule: Roman Provincial Governors in Luke-Acts*, p. 199-201.

Life's fragility gives it urgency, and those of us who watch these tragedies unfold have opportunity to repent, to turn toward God, and allow God's saving grace to have its way with us. Remember the fig tree, Jesus says. Just because you have not been cut down by tragedy, the parable warns, do not presume that you are bearing fruit. God's patience and mercy hold judgment at bay for a little longer, but now, right now while the loss of human life is on your mind, this is the moment for you to behave as God is calling you to live your precious life.

When Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will perish just like they did," he is urging us to remember human life is a gift, albeit a fragile one, and God's saving mercy can still be experienced within our fleeting existence. Repentance isn't so much about moral uprightness, expressions of regret, or a one-hundred-eighty degree turn-around. Rather, here and elsewhere in the Bible, repentance refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things from God's perspective that has moral and ethical implications." For people of faith, tragedies and catastrophes like what we see unfold in our world today, drive us to mourn and lament, as we should. But they also have the power to arrest our attention, and shake us out of complacency. Jesus is asking us: "with an urgency fueled by raw memories of blood and rubble on the ground: What about you? How will you live the life you get to live now?"

Which, just a little way down the road, leads someone else in the crowd to ask Jesus: "Will only a few be saved?" "Strive," the word means "struggle, to enter through the narrow door. Many will try and not be able." Jesus refuses to answer the question about salvation directly, but again uses that inquiry as a warning. As if to say "being saved" is not simply a matter of our ultimate destination after death. Rather, being saved concerns the more immediate crisis that hangs over God's people right now and here. To enter the Kingdom of God takes energy and commitment and perseverance to get in. Jesus is giving the people a chance to see that their spiritual, moral and ethical choices matter. The

kingdom will ultimately open wide to all God's people, the world over, from east and west, from north and south, but we have a choice to live a Kingdom life now.

My preacher friend, Bob Dunham, has said it this way: "There are no easy answers to life's tough questions. The church of Jesus Christ is not built upon easy answers. Instead, it is built upon a singular recognition that in the presence of Jesus Christ, we get a God whose love challenges us, and enables us, to live without all the answers, a God who is willing to dig around in our hearts, encouraging us toward repentance and faithfulness and fruitfulness. We get a God who has given us life in Jesus, so that we might learn how to give our lives to God more fully."³

Friends, today's gospel interactions with Jesus, encourage us to look at the tragic horror of what is going on in the world, and not be resigned to despair. We are being saved even now by a Merciful God who is, with urgency, showing us how to live. Jesus came that we might have life in abundance, and those who follow Jesus seek abundant life for the world. The Christian faith flings outward. We live our faith *for* others, and work together to seek the flourishing of all creation. Followers of Jesus present their voices and labors in the public square for the betterment of the world."

My friend, Kim Clayton, is serving Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta as their interim pastor. In this season of Lent, she has encouraged members of her congregation not to give anything up for Lent. As she says, over the last two pandemic years we have given up so much already. Instead, she is encouraging them to take on, with purpose and intention, concrete acts of discipleship. I love the way she has invited them saying, "I propose being as creative as you can, doing at least one imaginative, hopeful act every week of Lent. She gives three examples:

³ Robert Dunham, "Beyond What's Fair," Day1.org, 3/7/10.

