"Making Sense of the Senseless"
+ 3 Lent +
March 11, 2007

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

Pick up a newspaper, any newspaper, and within the first 2 pages, you will find something sad that makes no sense. Turn on CNN, watch for 2 minutes or less and you will find the same sad story. Open up a Time or a Newsweek, flip pass the ads and the letters to the editor, and very shortly there also you find something senseless that has happened to someone for which there is no clear explanation other than we are sinners living in a sin-filled world where bad things happen – often to very impoverished unsuspecting people who have few if any resources to deal with their tragedies.

I have always thought one of the hardest “crosses to bear” for any child of God is to live in this world where bad things happen to good people and where the innocent often suffer more than the guilty, and yet to keep on hoping, keep on trusting, keep on proclaiming the goodness, the graciousness, the incomparable love of God. Some things just don't make sense in this world (that's the reason that "why?" is our favorite question) and when senseless suffering and sorrow come close to home, even the strongest believer struggles to hang on not only to their faith, but more importantly, to the God in whom they have placed that faith.

That's what misfortune does to us. And the greater the misfortune or the closer it comes, the greater the doubt. That's where the Gospel begins this morning with the struggle of "Making Sense (out) of the Senseless." Now Luke didn't give us the back story to the incidents he mentioned in the Gospel. Apparently they were both fairly recent events in the lives of Jesus’ listeners and so were commonly known and thus needed no further explanation, which is kind of frustrating for us who live 2,000 years later and would like “THE REST OF THE STORY!”

But let me tell you what we do know and from what we know, what conclusions had been drawn by those surrounding Jesus – the ones demanding His explanation for the cruel and senseless slaughters that were fresh and painful in their hearts and minds.

The first incident mentions 3 details: Galileans, Pontius Pilate and sacrifices. Well, Pontius Pilate is a familiar figure. We know him as the Roman governor who presided at the trial of Jesus and as the one, who, washing his hands of Jesus, gave the order for the crucifixion. His official title was the "procurator of Judea," but I am certain the Hebrew man and woman on the street had a much more colorful name for him. I’ve never lived in an occupied country but I can only imagine what they called the Romans behind their backs.

What is curious is that Luke mentions that it was Galileans who were killed by Pilate - Galileans from Galilee, not Judeans from Judea. Galileans were ruled by Herod, the same Herod to whom Pilate sent Jesus for trial when he had learned that Jesus was from Nazareth in Galilee.
Here’s the sticky point to ponder: Pilate had no legal right to execute these Galileans. In fact, it was this particular incident that some say began the personal feud between Herod and Pilate that lasted until they had both bloodied their hands in the crucifixion of Jesus. They were only friends again once Jesus was dead.

That's the personal connection. Secondly, those Galileans were killed in the process of offering their sacrifices in the Temple. We don't know why that is the case. Maybe since the Galileans were commonly assumed to be troublemakers, Pilate mistook their gathering and their participation in a religious ceremony as the beginning of a riot. This is, truthfully, quite unclear – the Romans tried to stay away from affairs at the temple. What we do know is that Pilate, on occasion, had his soldiers dress as Jewish peasants in order to infiltrate the crowds who gathered at Jewish festivals and should there be any trouble, there were Roman swords under those robes to restore order.

It was, in other words, completely consistent with the character of the man that Pilate would over-react, come down hard and fast on anything that might make him look bad or ineffective as a procurator and thus spoil his chances for a promotion out of Judea (and every Roman wanted OUT of Judea – lovely temple but the locals were uncontrollable).

So here were godly Galileans engaged in a godly act in a godly place. And they died horribly, at the hands of a pagan whose troops "mingled their blood with the blood of their sacrifices." Human and animal blood intermingled was an abomination. So people were asking "why?" just as we often do when bad things happen to good people. Why would God let something so awful happen right in His own house to people who were doing something God ought to have appreciated? How do you make sense of something so senseless?

If God does not spare godly people who are doing godly things in godly places, where is the justice in that? Or, turn it around, if God chose not to spare them, might it be that godly people doing godly things in godly places are still hiding something so ungodly that God has no choice but to let His judgment fall on them? That is what was going through the minds of the people that were asking Jesus questions that day – why? Why? WHY? Which is why Jesus answered the way He did. "Do you think that these Galileans suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than other Galileans? That is one common way to make sense of the senseless – “there must have been something bad about them that we don’t know. That family that was killed in the fire – they must have been careless. That young couple hit by the drunk driver – they shouldn’t have been out so late. Trouble is Jesus says, “no” there was nothing worse about them than anyone else."  

So also that business about the tower of Siloam, probably a construction accident in the city of Jerusalem during the building of a water system - a water system, incidentally, authorized by Pontius Pilate, connected to some space he had seized under the Temple platform for storage tanks and paid for by the funds he had raided from the Temple. The not so charitable assumption is that the workers, themselves, were guilty for being involved in a project that profaned the Temple and so they got what they deserved when it fell and killed them.
Why do we do that? Why do we blame the victims? Well, sometimes the victims are to blame; sometimes not. But a part of us has to believe that people get what they deserve so that we can reassure ourselves that if we watch our steps, nothing bad will happen to us because we have never done anything bad enough to deserve whatever it is that we’re afraid is going to happen or might happen. That’s how we make sense out of the senseless.

I suppose that sounds like circlespeak here, but human minds, when they interpret events and bring God into the picture can reach only two contradictory conclusions: Either God is an uncaring God who is unaware of the sufferings of people or perhaps not strong enough to intervene. Or God knows something we don’t know and thus it is true that people only and always get what they deserve.

But the truth is somewhere else and not in either of those assumptions. Jesus said "…unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." There is a reason why bad things happen to good people and that reason is at the root of Jesus’ call for repentance. Even though we admit the obvious, that this world is not perfect, still there is a part of us that wants to believe we are not responsible for its imperfections and that if we do what we can to keep our own little corners clean, we will be spared. We sin (the little stuff that everybody does) but we don't SIN (the big stuff that leads God to let towers fall on people or let them get murdered by pompous pagans).

But if you want to make some sense of the senseless, you have to adopt a different point of view and a world view big enough to see the whole picture. Bad things happen in this world because it is a broken world filled with broken people; people who break things, break one another and break themselves. Just like a car with a bad starter sometimes starts and sometimes doesn't, or a defective light switch sometimes works and sometimes doesn't, you and I are living in a world where not all evil is immediately punished and much good often goes unrecognized and unrewarded. It doesn't mean God has stopped watching or working. But it does mean that you and I have to surrender the notion that by our own efforts we can make life turn out right. It doesn't mean we stop trying, but as we try, we change our direction, which, as you know, is the meaning of repentance. Only repentance turns us away from ourselves and leads us back to the God whom we often leave behind us. Repentance – that 180 degree turn.

So Jesus told a parable to tell us what that looks like. Just like a fig tree, you and I are planted in the world and watered by the Word. Back in old Judea those fig trees were a precious commodity, so protected they were always planted within a vineyard to make sure they received the best of care. But the Hebrews also believed that fig trees sapped the ground of so much of its strength that they had to produce figs. No figs, no tree; haul out the shovels and dig it up. And three years was the generally accepted time frame in which the axe was held to the roots of the tree but not yet swung to sever them.

But the gardener in the parable had a better idea: "Leave it alone, let me dig around it and put manure on it." It's strange but not at all a coincidence that the word for "leave it alone" in the parable is the same word that is used for "forgive," as in "let's forgive the tree for its failures and fertilize it.
Well, we get forgiven a lot, don't we? Sometimes it seems that a lot of manure comes our way - the smelly, nasty stuff. But it makes us grow; grow in grace, grow in compassion, grow in faith. And that's how God makes sense out of the senseless. In Jesus' name. Amen. Now may God's peace calm our fears, strengthen our hearts, and help us bring His saving love into this troubled, broken world.