

## **Luke 13: 1-9**

**SHE MADE AN APPOINTMENT TO COME SEE ME. "I ONLY NEED TWENTY MINUTES," SHE SAID. "I WANT TO ASK YOU TWO QUESTIONS." SHE WAS SMART, SUCCESSFUL, HAD A GREAT JOB WITH A BEAUTIFUL FAMILY, HUSBAND AND 2 SCHOOL AGED SONS. ON THE DAY OF THE APPOINTMENT, SHE ARRIVED PROMPTLY, SAT DOWN, TOOK A KLEENEX FROM HER POCKET, AND TOLD ME THE STEM CELL TRANSPLANT HER HUSBAND RECEIVED TWO YEARS AGO WAS FAILING AND THE CANCER HE HAD BATTLED SO COURAGEOUSLY AND SUCCESSFULLY HAD RETURNED. THIS TIME IT DIDN'T LOOK GOOD AT ALL. "I'M HERE TO ASK TWO QUESTIONS. AND I WANT ANSWERS. "WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO HIM/OUR FAMILY?" "WHAT DID I DO WRONG?" "IT'S JUST NOT FAIR," SHE SAID, "AND I WISH I HAD ANSWERS. IT'S WHY WE PAY YOU, I THINK. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO HAVE ANSWERS, AREN'T YOU?"**

**WE TALKED. WE TALKED MANY MORE TIMES OVER THE NEXT YEAR. WE TALKED ABOUT THE OLDEST QUESTIONS IN HUMAN HISTORY: WHY DO PEOPLE SUFFER, AND DOES GOD HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT?**

**BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR REMEMBERS A STORY A FRIEND OF HERS TOLD ABOUT HER SON, JEFF, WHEN HE WAS A TODDLER. LITTLE JEFF ADORED HIS GRANDFATHER. IT WAS BACK IN THE DAYS SOME OF US REMEMBER, BEFORE SEAT BELTS, WHEN IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON FOR A YOUNG CHILD TO STAND ON THE FRONT SEAT WITH HIS OR HER ARM AROUND THE DRIVER'S NECK. I CAN'T BELIEVE WE ACTUALLY DID THAT, BUT WE DID, AND I STILL REMEMBER THE FEELING OF MY ARM AROUND MY DAD'S NECK AS HE DROVE THROUGH THE STREETS OF RAPID CITY. IN FACT, THERE IS AN ODD BEHAVIOR THAT SOME PEOPLE STILL DO WHEN IT IS NECESSARY TO SLAM ON THE BRAKES. SOME PEOPLE STILL AUTOMATICALLY PUT OUT THEIR RIGHT ARM TO PROTECT AND STEADY THE CHILD WHO USED TO STAND THERE.**

**THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED TO LITTLE JEFF. A DOG RAN OUT IN FRONT OF THE CAR. HIS GRANDFATHER SLAMMED ON THE BRAKES. JEFF FELL INTO THE DASHBOARD AND BUMPED HIS HEAD, NOT SERIOUSLY, BUT PAINFULLY. HE CRIED AND CRIED AND THROUGH HIS TEARS ASKED HIS BELOVED GRANDFATHER, "PAW-PAW, WHAT DID I DO WRONG?"**

**THAT CHILD'S LOSS OF INNOCENCE IS SOMETHING WE ALL HAVE TO SUFFER. WE GET THROUGH TEN OR TWENTY YEARS IN OUR LIVES BELIEVING IN A UNIVERSE THAT REWARDS GOOD AND PUNISHES EVIL, UNTIL ONE DAY LIFE SLAMS ON THE BRAKES AND WE LEARN THE TRUTH: YOU CAN DO EVERYTHING RIGHT AND STILL GET HURT. GOODNESS IS NO PROTECTION FROM PAIN.**

**THE BIBLE WRESTLES WITH THE QUESTION OF TRAGEDY AND PAIN. IT CAME UP ONE TIME WHEN TWO TERRIBLE TRAGEDIES OCCURRED DURING THE LIFE OF JESUS. PEOPLE MUST HAVE TALKED ABOUT THEM. A GROUP OF FAITHFUL JEWS FROM GALILEE, JESUS' HOME AS WELL, TRAVELED TO JERUSALEM TO MAKE SACRIFICES IN THE TEMPLE, A RELIGIOUS OBLIGATION. FOR SOME REASON, MAYBE TO TEACH A LESSON IN ROMAN POWER, MAYBE BECAUSE HE WAS BRUTALLY VIOLENT, PERHAPS JUST FOR AMUSEMENT, THE GOVERNOR, PONTIUS PILATE, ORDERED HIS GUARDS TO KILL THEM.....AT WORSHIP, SO THAT THEIR OWN**

**BLOOD MIXED WITH THE BLOOD FROM THE SACRIFICIAL ANIMALS. IT WAS A TERRIBLE, MEANINGLESS TRAGEDY. WAS IT BECAUSE THEY HAD SINNED, DONE SOMETHING WRONG? SOME SAID SO. AND THE TOWER OF SILOAM, ON THE CITY WALL, COLLAPSED. EIGHTEEN PEOPLE DIED, MAYBE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS, AND THE SCAFFOLDING COLLAPSED; MAYBE THEY WERE JUST IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME. WAS IT BECAUSE THEY WERE WORSE SINNERS THAN EVERYONE ELSE IN JERUSALEM?**

**AN ANSWER THAT THE MASSES IN JESUS' TIME SEEMED TO CLING TO IN EXPLAINING THE MURDER OF THE GALILEANS AND THE TRAGIC DEATH OF THE EIGHTEEN WAS THAT OF RETRIBUTION FOR SIN—THAT BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO BAD PEOPLE, THAT SUFFERING IS DESERVED, THAT WHEN PEOPLE SUFFER, WHEN THEY ARE PUNISHED, YOU NEED NOT WORRY ABOUT FALLING TO THE SAME FATE AS LONG AS YOU KEEP YOUR NOSE CLEAN AND YOU MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.**

**AND TO SOME DEGREE, LIKE IT OR NOT, WE STILL OFTEN THINK THIS WAY. CALAMITY STRIKES AND WE WONDER WHAT WE DID WRONG. WE SCRUTINIZE OUR BEHAVIOR, OUR RELATIONSHIPS, OUR DIETS, OUR BELIEFS. WE HUNT FOR SOME CAUSE TO EXPLAIN THE EFFECT, IN HOPES WE CAN CHANGE WHAT WE ARE DOING AND SO STOP WHATEVER HAS GONE (OR IS GOING) WRONG. WHAT WE CRAVE, ABOVE ALL, IS CONTROL OVER THE CHAOS IN OUR LIVES.**

**IT WAS NO DIFFERENT IN JESUS' TIME. PEOPLE LONGED TO UNDERSTAND AND CONTROL MISFORTUNE. SO THE CROWDS ASKED JESUS ABOUT THE GALILEANS SLAIN BY PILATE, AND THEY WONDERED ABOUT THOSE WHO WERE KILLED WHEN THE TOWER OF SILOAM COLLAPSED. WHAT HAD THOSE PEOPLE DONE TO DESERVE THEIR FATE? MIGHT THOSE TRAGEDIES HAVE BEEN PREVENTED?**

**JESUS DOES NOT REALLY ARGUE WITH THE POPULAR EQUATION OF SIN AND DEATH. WHAT HE SEEMS TO WANT TO EMPHASIZE IS THAT DEATH IS ALWAYS CLOSE AND NOT NECESSARILY CONTROLLABLE OR EXPLAINABLE. DEATH HAPPENS, JESUS SAYS. IT CAN HAPPEN WHEN YOU'RE PRAYING. IT CAN HAPPEN WHEN YOU'RE STANDING UNDER A WALL. IT CAN CATCH YOU BY SURPRISE. AND THOUGH YOU MIGHT INTEND TO REPENT OF SIN AT THE END OF YOUR LIFE, WHAT'S TO SAY YOU'LL HAVE THE TIME TO DO SO? JESUS SOUNDS LESS COMPASSIONATE THAN WE EXPECT HE WOULD BE BUT JESUS IS NOT AIMING TO COMFORT THE CROWD; HE WANTS TO CHALLENGE THEM.**

**JESUS TOUCHES THE PANIC THE PEOPLE HAVE INSIDE OF THEM ABOUT ALL THE AWFUL THINGS THAT ARE HAPPENING AROUND THEM. THEY ARE TERRIFIED BY THOSE THINGS...FOR GOOD REASON. THEY HAVE LAIN AWAKE AT NIGHT MAKING LISTS OF THEIR MISTAKES.**

**JESUS WANTS THEM TO TURN TOWARD HIM. REPENTANCE. AND TO MAKE HIS POINT, JESUS TELLS A PARABLE. IT IS NOT EXACTLY A WARM AND FUZZY PARABLE. IT IS A PARABLE THAT UNDERSCORES GOD'S JUDGMENT AND THE NEED FOR REPENTANCE. JESUS TELLS THE STORY OF A FIG TREE THAT IS NOT PRODUCING AND HOW THE LANDOWNER HAS GROWN IMPATIENT WITH ITS ABILITY TO BEAR FRUIT. HE PROPOSES CUTTING THE TREE DOWN. BUT THE GARDENER ARGUES FOR A ONE-YEAR REPRIEVE. LET ME WORK WITH THE TREE FOR ONE**

MORE YEAR AND THEN, IF IT DOES NOT PRODUCE FRUIT, WE CAN CUT IT DOWN. THIS PARABLE INVITES US TO CONSIDER THE GIFT OF ANOTHER YEAR OF LIFE AS AN ACT OF GOD'S MERCY. JESUS IS THE GARDENER, ISN'T HE? HE REFUSED TO GIVE UP ON THOSE WHO ARE LIVING IN THE VINEYARD. MAYBE THE VINEYARD IS THE WHOLE EARTH. MAYBE IT'S THE CHURCH. MAYBE IT'S YOUR LIFE AND MINE. JESUS ISN'T GIVING UP ON ANY OF US...YOU, ME, THE CHURCH, THE WHOLE EARTH. THERE'S HOPE IN THIS PARABLE—DON'T CUT THE TREE DOWN. BUT THERE'S ALSO URGENCY...GIVE ME ONE MORE YEAR.

COULD THIS BE THE YEAR? WE CAN HEAR THAT AS A THREAT. THERE'S NOT MUCH TIME LEFT. BUT JESUS' PARABLE MOVES IN THE DIRECTION OF PROMISE MORE THAN THREAT: "I'M GOING TO DO EVERYTHING I CAN DO TO HELP THIS TREE LIVE AND BEAR FRUIT..I'M GOING TO FIND EVERY WAY POSSIBLE TO GET TO HEARTS THAT ARE HARD AS PACKED DOWN SOIL." WHILE WE'RE SPECULATING ABOUT WHY CERTAIN PEOPLE DIED AT PILATE'S HANDS OR WHY THE OTHERS WERE KILLED BY THE FALLING TOWER, JESUS, THE GARDENER, IS WORKING ON OUR HEARTS. YES, THOSE STORIES WERE REAL. THEY WERE AS REAL AS EVERY TRAGEDY WE CAN NAME...SUCH REALITIES REMIND US THAT OUR TIME IS FINITE. STORIES LIKE THESE DIG AT OUR HEARTS. THEY GET TO US WITH THE TRUTH THAT WE CAN'T KEEP PUTTING EVERYTHING OFF UNTIL TOMORROW...

JESUS, THE GARDENER, WANTS US TO LIVE. DON'T CUT THE TREE DOWN. LET IT ALONE FOR ONE MORE YEAR. HIS PASSION IS MARKED BY HIS GREAT URGENCY...DON'T WAIT. LOOK AT YOUR LIFE AND DARE TO ASK THE HARD QUESTIONS: HAVE I CONFESSED JESUS AS MY SAVIOR? AM I STINGY IN MY LOVE FOR OTHERS? AM I WITHHOLDING FORGIVENESS FOR OLD WRONGS? AM I SO BUSY MAKING A LIVING THAT I'VE FORGOTTEN TO MAKE MY LIFE IN CHRIST? JESUS DIGS AT US WITH QUESTIONS LIKE THESE AS THEY MOVE US TOWARD REPENTANCE.

THE SEASON OF LENT IS A TIME TO FOCUS NOT ON WHO IS WORSE OR WHAT IS WRONG WITH EVERYBODY ELSE. THE SEASON OF LENT IS TIME TO FOCUS ON WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME, WITH YOU. "I TELL YOU, UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL ALL PERISH JUST AS THEY DID. TURN AWAY FROM THE WAYS OF SIN AND DEATH AND TOWARDS THE ONE WHO WILL BRING NEW LIFE.

"WHY DID THAT HAPPEN TO THEM?" THE PEOPLE ASKED JESUS. "WHY DID THIS HAPPEN TO ME?" WE ASK. PROBABLY FOR NO GOOD REASON. BAD AND GOOD THINGS HAPPEN ALL THE TIME. THE MORE CRUCIAL QUESTION IS, IN ALL OF LIFE'S CIRCUMSTANCES OF JOY AND PAIN, CAN TRUST GOD TO BE GOD?

WE HAVE A GOD WHO IS WILLING TO DIG AROUND OUR HEARTS, PATIENTLY ENCOURAGING US TOWARD REPENTANCE AND FAITHFULNESS AND FRUITFULNESS. JESUS CHRIST WHO HAS GIVEN HIS WHOLE LIFE FOR US, SO THAT WE MIGHT COME TO LEARN HOW TO GIVE OUR LIVES TO HIM MORE FULLY. BEYOND WHAT'S FAIR, THAT SEEMS TO ME TO BE A PRETTY GOOD DEAL.

