

What Happens When the Banana Peel Drops  
Lent 3/C  
March 7, 2010

Luke 13:1-9

*This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.*

Dear Friends:

One spring day, a young boy was out fishing with his dad. At mid day, dad took out the sack lunch he had prepared for them and the first thing the young boy ate was the banana, the peel of which, without thinking, the boy simply tossed into the lake. As the banana peel began to drift away from the boat, the father saw it and said, "Did you throw that banana peel in the water?"

"Well, yes" the boy said sheepishly.

"Son," the father replied, "God doesn't want you littering like that."

"Gee," the boy responded with a tone of guilt in his voice, "I'm sorry."

Not long after lunch, dad looked up and noticed storm clouds building in the west. Pointing this out to the boy, dad began to row mightily in order to get off the lake and back to their cabin before the storm hit. No sooner had they reached the cabin when the storm unleashed its fury, the rain poured down complete with full orchestration of loud thunder and lightening flashes. Father and son stood in the doorway of the cabin watching. As the storm began to subside the boy, remembering his guilt at lunch time said, "Wow! All that over a banana peel!"

There are events in this world and our own lives that prompt the question: What did I do to deserve this? Or we ask: "Why do bad things happen to good people? Does God cause tragedy and storms?" These are heart-wrenching, age-old questions. When hurt and pain come our way or when changes suddenly upend our lives, we may tend to wonder "Why me?" "Why now?" "Why this?" And we go looking for banana peels in our lives in hopes of finding a reason for what has come upon us.

The boy who went fishing with his dad believed that what he had done with the banana peel was wrong. Then he made a connection between that act and the sudden storm which he attributed to God as punishment. It is a progression of thinking that I've heard many times.

In the recent devastating earthquake in Haiti which killed nearly a 1/4 of a million people, the American preacher Pat Robertson speculated on why Haiti has suffered so much over the years. According to Robertson, God sent that earthquake because the Haitian people deserved it for making a pact with the devil to gain freedom from France over 200 years ago. Back in 2006 Pat Robertson made a similar statement claiming that God sent Hurricane Katrina as punishment for the country's sins, such as legalized abortion. It is clear to me that Preacher Robertson has not paid attention to what Jesus has to say in the bible reading today.



Jesus faced questions about the source of tragedy and suffering. In today's Bible reading, Jesus is in conversation with some Jews who want to know if the sins of some people resulted in their execution by the government rule named Pilate. These Jews, apparently accepted the banana peel theory that tragedy happens in response to personal behavior -- that God punishes sin with suffering.

To the question of suffering as a consequence of sin Jesus asks: "Do you think that these people were worse sinners than everyone else just because of what happened to them? Not at all! But you can be sure that if you don't turn back to God, every one of you will also die."

God's way of dealing with our sin is not to cause us to suffer, but to direct us to something greater.

Back to the conversation between the Jews and Jesus. He goes on to question them about their thinking tying tragedy to sinfulness. He asks: "Do you think the 18 innocent people who died when a tower fell on them died because they sinned more than you? Not at all! But you can be sure that if you don't turn back to God, every one of you will also die."

To the question "Does God bring tragedy to people because of their sin? Jesus flips the question inside out and says "You cannot judge others on the basis of their life experiences. Instead, look to yourselves, assess our own faithfulness to God and turn back to God."



Jesus rejects the theory that we have storms in our lives because we have dropped a banana peel and haven't turned our lives to God.

A popular book some years back was Rabbi Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. This book considered the question: How can God be good and still allow bad things to happen to good people? The question intrigued millions to read the book. But this question didn't interest Jesus. Rather Jesus lumps all violence, natural disaster and suffering together and does not ascribe it to any source.

Still the idea persists in our minds - I hear it often. I've been asked "Why is God doing this to me? What did I do deserve this illness, this job loss, this sadness, this crisis?" In our minds we strive to find a causal relationship. We think "If I'm a good person, a good Christian, God will be good to me." Author Thornton Wilder in his prize-winning book "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" told the story of the finest bridge in all Peru in the early 1700's which collapses and kills five people. Brother Juniper, a Franciscan missionary, happens to witness the tragedy, and as a result, he asks the central question of the novel: "Why did this happen to those five?" He sets out to investigate these five people to find the reason for this tragedy. In the end he came to the conclusion that there was nothing in the lives of those people that caused their deaths.

Back to the story of Jesus and the Jews and the discussion about why the people were killed by Pilate and why the tower fell and killed 18 people. Jesus doesn't give an answer -- because there isn't an answer. Rabbi Kushner in his popular book answers such tragedy by calling it luck which it isn't dependent upon a person's goodness or badness. Life does play out with a lack of fairness.

Unfortunately, that thinking had nothing to do with what Jesus says. When presented with two excellent examples of life's unfairness, Jesus reply is not like Rabbi Kushner's: "well, these bad things happen, mostly as a matter of luck, and you must learn to live with them." Rather, Jesus says, "Do you think that they were worse offenders than you? Not at all! But you can be sure that if you don't turn back to God, every one of you will also die."

Listen carefully here. Jesus knows how the questions we commonly ask about why bad things happen to good people deter from the bigger question which is not about what we deserve for being good people. The question Jesus wants us to ask is: "How do I stand before God?"

Jesus didn't answer people's questions about life's fairness. Rather in the midst of life's struggles and tragedies Jesus directs us to examine our own relationship with God. Why? It's in the hope that we will move toward a greater trust and faithfulness in a God who would endure suffering and give everything for the benefit of all.

In the next few weeks leading up to Easter I hope you'll be here. We're going to read more stories about Jesus as he deals with life's challenges. He himself faces incredible unfairness. More than you and I will ever face. But in Jesus we'll see that God doesn't deal with us fairly. Not at all! Instead, to our benefit we'll learn again the incredible, forever love that is given us - even when we slip up in life or throw the banana peel into the lake. Amen.

