

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor John Swanson**

 March 24, 2019 – 3 Lent On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)
 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: Luke 13:1-9

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Theodicy. Merriam-Webster defines theodicy as “the defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.” Humans have wrestled with this issue – this great challenge of understanding evil and the place of evil in a world that is created by a loving and all-knowing God – we have been trying to figure that out for a long, long time.

We are presented with two stories of tragedy here in Luke. The first is a story appears to refer to a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem who were massacred by soldiers under order of Pilate. The second is a story of a tower perhaps part of the wall around Jerusalem that collapsed and eighteen people were crushed.

We know of those kinds of events, don’t we? Terrible tragedies, where countless people die simply because of the randomness or foolishness of life? News of the cyclone in Mozambique is just the most recent tragedy that somehow pulls us in and leads us to worry, to wonder and to ultimately ask questions. “Why” questions. Questions that speak to the randomness, the swiftness, and the finality that comes with these kinds of tragedies.

I guess, in a nutshell, we learn that life is fragile.

In our Gospel, Jesus was confronted with some of those “why” questions. Why did God allow this to happen? Why did the people die – were they really bad people? Jesus dismissed all of those questions - he clearly stated that sin did not make those terrible things happen. They just happened. But Jesus did not leave it there.

Jesus picked up on the challenging reality that life is so very fragile, and, pulling attention away from the why questions and even away from the disasters and the victims, Jesus turned instead to those who had thus far avoided the hazards of life and said to them and Jesus also says to us, “Don’t mistake your good fortunes as evidence of God’s special blessing. You need to repent – now!”

 Theologian Matt Skinner says this about Jesus’ call to repent here in Luke 13, “…Jesus does not explain the causes of violence that nature and human beings regularly inflict upon unsuspecting people. He does not blame victims. He does not attempt to defend creation or the Creator when ‘why?’ questions seem warranted. At least in this scene, he offers no theological speculation and

inflicts no emotional abuse. He asks, 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?”**

He’s saying that Jesus’ call to repent is a call to take stock and to shift gears. **“What about you? How will you live the life you get to live?”**

Yes, life is fragile – at times, it can be terrifyingly fragile. We might wish it not to be, but still it is. Even with all of our skills and all the technology that we currently have – life is still fragile (just as fragile as it was 2000 years ago).

So, because it is that fragile, Jesus is saying to all of us, there is an urgency to get on board – to bear fruits worthy of repentance: care for the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, set the captive free.

**What about you? How will you live the life you get to live?** Those questions are haunting. When I think about them, I cannot help but think of the World War II movie, “Saving Private Ryan.”

The gist of this fictional movie is that Private (James) Ryan is the last living brother of four – his three older brothers died earlier in the war. This news gets to General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, and he orders that whatever can be done, will be done to save Private Ryan.

A small band of soldiers led by Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) do just that. They save Private Ryan. At the end of the movie – at the bridge where a number of the small band are dead, dying or injured, Private Ryan kneels down before a dying Captain Miller. Captain Miller leans over and says, “Earn this. Earn it.” And then Captain Miller dies.

The scene fades to now – or at least 1998 when the movie was made – where the movie began, a Normandy cemetery with an elderly Private Ryan. He stands before Captain Miller’s grave, kneels down and says, “My family is with me today – they wanted to come with me. To be honest with you I wasn’t sure how I would feel coming back here. Every day I think about what you said to me that day on that bridge. I’ve tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I’ve earned what all of you have done for me.”

I hesitated to use this image for a number of reasons, one of them being that I have a problem with the phrase “earn it” – it sounds so anti grace; so demanding; so unforgiving; so un-Lutheran.

However, the way Private Ryan lived out that phrase in his life and how he kept it as a driving force day in and day out from that day on the bridge in June of 1944 until that day in the Normandy cemetery fifty some years later – that focus reveals the same kind of focus - the same kind of determination and drive – that we are to possess as we live out Jesus’ call to repent.

There is no telling what tomorrow will bring – life is indeed fragile. **What about you? How will you live the life you get to live?”** We embrace today. We rejoice in that gift. And we live lives worthy of repentance. Amen.