

Never give up

Luke 13:1-9

February 28, 2010

Do you believe everything happens for a reason?

Was there a reason you were thinking of the buddy you hadn't seen in forty years just as he was thinking of you?

Was there a reason you chose today to call your friend, just when she needed to hear a friendly voice?

Was there a reason you lost your job and had to move on and landed in a place and among people who brought out the best in you?

Was there a reason they called you back to let you know you could make dinner reservations for that evening after all?

Was there a reason Gina Swaim and Paul Greene were paired as cheerleading partners at ISU?

Was there a reason six-year-old Matthew Blackman was placed in Mrs. Ensworth's kindergarten class where she got to know him and his foster parents and his brother, Henry, and his sister, Louisa?

Is there a reason you are in church today?

Surely there is! Surely there is a reason for the events that befall us, for the opportunities that are presented to us, for the people that are brought into our lives, for the people into whose lives we are brought. I do believe in a God who provides and protects and guides, a God whose gracious designs are woven into the fabric of our lives in ways mostly unrecognized and mysterious. Do you believe everything happens for a reason?

Then what about the other side? What about the bad things? Not the growing old or the getting sick or the disappointments that come to all of us along life's way, but the accidents, the tragedies, the disasters. Do these things happen for a reason?

It was fifty-one years ago this month, February 3, 1959, "the day the music died." On that day Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens and the "Big Bopper," J. P. Richardson took off in plane from an airfield in Clear Lake, Iowa bound for Fargo, North Dakota. They never arrived. On the way the plane was brought down in a storm killing all three and their pilot.

But there were two other musicians, members of Buddy Holly's band, who were not on the plane, traveling instead in a chartered bus with no heat. Waylon Jennings gave up his seat on the plane to Richardson who was ill. Tommy Allsup flipped a coin with Ritchie Valens for the last seat on the plane and lost. Tommy Allsup lost the coin toss ... and saved his life!

Was there a reason? Was there a reason Jennings gave up his seat? Was there a reason Holly and Richardson and Valens were marked to die and Allsup and Jennings were spared?

Was there a reason the EF5 tornado leveled most of Parkersburg and not Aplington?

Was there a reason you got cancer and your sister didn't?

Was there a reason hundreds of thousands of Haitians were killed and a million more left homeless by the great earthquake on January 12?

Rev. Pat Robertson said there was a reason. The Haitian people are cursed, he said, because of a pact their ancestors made with the devil to win independence from France. They sold their souls.

So, by all means, you need not waste any pity on them, hungry and homeless and hopelessly poor as they are. They brought this on themselves!

Or was there a reason hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans and displaced half its population?

Rev. John Hagee said there was a reason. The hurricane was God's curse on New Orleans, he said, striking the city on the very day a gay pride parade was scheduled to take place.

An Austrian priest agreed, calling Katrina an act of divine retribution, noting the hurricane destroyed brothels and nightclubs and abortion clinics.

Not to mention churches and hospitals and women and babies and home of Sophie, an eighty-year-old Christian saint!

Or was there a reason New York and rest of America suffered such a terrible loss when two planes were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001?

Rev. Jerry Falwell said there was. The attack was God's judgment on our nation's tolerance of homosexuality and abortion and feminism.

Apparently tolerance of torture and discrimination and neglect of the poor and ruination of the environment require no such wake up call!

So, according to Pat and John and Jerry, there are reasons for the awful disasters that befall -- not themselves, of course! -- but "those" people. It is because of their sins!

That's the judgment of these men of God, but let's get another opinion. Let's ask Jesus!

Some people did just that. They told Jesus about his compatriots, fellow Galileans, who had been slaughtered by the Roman governor, Pilate, in the very act of worshipping God. They wanted an explanation. They wanted to know why. Surely it must be because of their sins!

Here's Jesus' answer:

Because those Galileans were killed in that way, do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No indeed!

[And] what about those eighteen people in Siloam who were killed when the tower fell on them? Do you suppose this proves that they were worse than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No indeed!

Jesus, were the people of Haiti being punished for their sins when the ground opened up beneath them? *No indeed!*

Jesus, were the people of New Orleans being punished for their sins when the waters deluged their homes? *No indeed!*

Jesus, were the attacks of 9/11 God's way of calling attention to our nation's sins? *No indeed!*

Jesus, when bad things happen to me, is God punishing me? *No indeed!*

No indeed! If you are looking for a reason, you're not going to find one. If you're trying to understand why it happened to them, so you can make sure it doesn't happen to you, you're not going to succeed.

In fact -- Jesus has more to say -- in fact,

if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did!

Pat and John and Jerry, Tim and Steve and Shelli, if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did! Disaster is at your doorstep, too!

Oh, thank you, Jesus! I feel so much better now.

Do you see what Jesus is doing? Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Jesus did what he always does. He turned the question around. He completely changed the direction of the discussion. They wanted to know why -- why bad things happened to those people. They wanted to be able to attach blame, to explain away the tragedy to get themselves off the hook, to ease their own terrors. But Jesus gave them no explanations. He didn't answer any of their "why" questions. He told them to worry about themselves!

No one is safe! We are all vulnerable to disaster! If we don't turn ourselves around, if we don't get our own lives together, death and worse awaits each one of us!

Oh, I do feel so much better!

But Jesus isn't finished. He has more to say. He told them a story, a story about a barren fig tree ...

There was once a man who had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. He went looking for figs on it but found none. So he said to his gardener, "Look, for three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig tree, and I haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?" But the gardener answered, "Leave it alone, sir, just one more year; I will dig around it and put in some fertilizer. Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down."

Now that's a tree that doesn't have its life together! *Just one more year ... Just one more year!*

Is your life together yet? Jesus hasn't given up on you. He's going to dig around in you a bit, work in a little fertilizer, wait and see what might come of you still. That's good news.

It's good news for us, but good news for Jesus, too. We are talking during Lent about the hazards, the pitfalls, the temptations, that cross Jesus' path on his journey to Jerusalem. The first temptation is fear. The second is despair. Despair is knocking at Jesus' door.

Think about it. The disciples may have left everything to follow Jesus, but Jesus has and will give up everything, including his life, for them and for us.

He has followed the path of obedience, pouring himself, body and soul, into the ministry of teaching and healing, proclaiming good news, offering God's gifts of grace and peace and life.

But the rich young man went away unhappy. Nicodemus had no idea what he was talking about. The people of his hometown of Nazareth tried to kill him. His own closest followers are often clueless, self-centered and unreliable. And the religious leadership, the ones he should expect to recognize the truth and grace he offers, think him a phony or worse -- a liar, a troublemaker, even an agent of the devil.

What lasting results does he have to show for all his work? Where are the trees bearing good fruit?

Just one more year ... Keep on working. Keep on keeping on. Don't give up. Maybe the tree will bear fruit yet. Don't give up. Never give up! In the face of despair, Jesus proclaims the good news of what still can be.

What are the results of your ministry? What are the results of mine? What do we have to show for our prayers, our service, our dedication to this church, our witness to the gospel, our obedience to Jesus' way? What has changed in us? What has changed in our world? Do we have our lives together yet? Are we coming any closer, any closer at all, to shalom?

Just one more year ... Keep on working. Keep on keeping on. Don't give up. Never give up!

Do you believe everything happens for a reason?

I do, but not in the usual sense. Jesus changes the meaning of the question. It's no more a question about causes and effects, about sins and punishment, about explanations and reassurances. It's a question about opportunity -- opportunity to receive grace, opportunity to offer grace.

Everything happens for a reason! Every event that befalls you, every person that you meet, provides an opportunity for grace to do its job, an opportunity for grace to do its work in you, filling you with hope in place of despair, with joy in place of grief, with love in place of fear, an opportunity for grace to do its work through you, as you offer hope and joy and love to those around you.

Everything that happens to you, every person that comes across your path, presents you a choice, a choice to embrace your life as it is with grace, or a choice to shut down or turn around or run away and hide, a choice to keep on keeping on, or a choice to give it up. Don't give up. Never give up!