

Lent 3, 2010
Good Hope Lutheran Church
Luke 13. 1 ff

Grace mercy and peace be multiplied among you all in the knowledge of God, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, AMEN.

The subject of today's sermon is really nothing new. We've dealt with it before, and like a bad penny I'm sure it'll keep coming back, make us look at it again someday. It's the age old question, why do people suffer. Why do WE suffer, why do we suffer sometimes in such outrageous ways, I mean a *little* suffering we could maybe understand—it humbles us, it teaches us. Builds character. But the sadness we see on the evening news, the things we ourselves have to go through from time to time, it seems to me to go beyond any reasonable "life lesson." Why do people not only suffer, but suffer so much? What does the Bible say.

Several things, as a matter of fact. On this as on other subjects, the Bible offers a number of insights, from a variety of points of view. There is for instance the perspective offered throughout the book of Psalms, starting already in Psalm 1. Good people *don't* suffer, it says in Psalm 1. Good people don't suffer, only the wicked do, as it is written, "Happy are they who have not walked in the way of evil doers, for everything they do shall prosper. But it is not so with the wicked; they are like chaff blown by the

wind.” Hmm. Well, ok, it is in the Bible and I do believe there is truth here, but to *see* the truth in Psalm 1 you have to widen your lens a little bit. You have to look at life, from the point of view of heaven. God has eternity to set things straight, so that if on earth it seems like the good suffer and the evil prosper, just wait. It shall not be so for very long, it shall not be so forever; God has eternity to straighten things out. Moreover, Psalm 1 challenges us to reflect on what we mean by happiness—in other words, in this world of time everyone good and evil alike has days of suffering and sorrow, but only those who walk with the Lord know the way to *deal* with that suffering, and the way to *deal* with that sorrow. I mean, think about your worst day and then ask yourself, what would that day have been like, if you didn’t know the Lord?

At any rate, that *very* briefly is from the book of Psalms. The book of Job offers another point of view. Job is this really great guy, ok, and yet he suffers terribly, why? Well, see, Satan wanted to test Job, and God thought that was a doable idea, it would after all be interesting to see what happened, so they shook hands in heaven and there you are—but this answer, raises even more questions. Like, what kind of a God would permit such suffering. What kind of God, would in effect make a bet with the Devil. The book of Job does not say—the final word you get in Job is that God is God and we

are not. God is God—powerful, wise; merciful, loving—and while we no more understand His ways than a two year old understands mom and dad still. Like that two year old. We the children of God, simply trust our heavenly Father, and look to Him to do what is right and good; like He promised He would.

So. There's Job, and before that there's the book of Psalms. Now the Gospel, and words spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself. We are in Luke 13—an unusual story, to say the least. I imagine Jesus walking along, when suddenly people run up to Him with a newspaper. "Hey Jesus!" they say. "Check out the headlines! Galileans murdered during worship! Blood flows with animal offerings; Pontius Pilate responsible, say outraged survivors." You'll recall, in those days people worshipped God with animal sacrifices, and evidently some folks were doing just that when they were murdered, their blood literally flowing with that of the animals they had offered, yikes. Why? Jesus answers that question with a question, Do you think it's because they were worse sinners than you? Do you? Because they weren't. But unless you repent you will likewise die. Or the construction workers killed when the tower they were working on fell—here I imagine Jesus grabbing the newspaper, and pointing to still another headline—these 18 construction workers who died. Were they worse sinners than you? No. That's not how it

works. I repeat, that's not how it works, God is not sitting up in heaven, rating sinners and picking out the worst ones to punish each day—no. But unless you repent you will likewise all die.

I understand Jesus' words this way. In a sinful world, suffering happens. In a sinful world—and this is a sinful world, and it has been since the days of Adam and Even and the end of Eden—in a sinful world suffering happens, and it happens, pretty much at random. We are all sinners living in a sinful world, so sooner or later we can all expect some suffering and sadness; sooner or later we can all expect to die—when? How? I don't know. Things like that happen pretty much at random, to be honest, and these Galileans and these construction workers—it was a tragedy. It was terrible. But it doesn't mean *they* were terrible—they weren't, they were people just like everyone else. And it doesn't mean God is terrible—He's not either, it is always His loving purpose to help, and to heal; and to save. All it means, plain and simple, is that in a sinful world from time to time suffering happens, tragedies strike, hearts get broken—it happens to people. That's all I know to say. It happens.

But then, Jesus Christ *happened* too. Jesus Christ is the Son of God Himself, who for us and for our salvation came into this world to suffer and die *on purpose*. His was not a random death, His was not an accidental cross,

His was one He chose—for us; for you, He died for you. On purpose! And in so doing, Jesus obviously did not show us how to avoid suffering, or how to cheat death; He didn't show us how to do an end run around tragedy.

Instead, He showed us the way through. And our risen Lord is here with us now, not offering you some sort of charmed life, free from all the aches and pains of earth. He is here to offer you a *redeemed* life, a hopeful life, a life of joy in spite of it all—a life of joy that sees beyond the aches and pains of earth, to the kingdom of heaven still to come.

In Luke 13, Jesus is asked Why, and as far as I can see He never really answers, except maybe to say “Because you're human, that's why.” Ok. But the power and glory of the Gospel is this—that all the world has asked God Why; all the world has asked God Why and has done so in every generation. And God has answered our Why, with a Who. Jesus Christ, that's Who. Hanging there on a cross He volunteered for, rising from a grave we dug, Jesus reveals the promise of what God has in store for those who put their trust in Him. So ask Why when you must—we all do—then hang on to the Who. Jesus Christ, that's Who; unto life everlasting.

In the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.