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Journey to Life

Luke 13:1-9

Intro

I am going to take you to some unpleasant places today. Why? That is where our scripture takes us. And – It is the season of Lent. It is time to look deeply within ourselves and our relationship with God.

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It is time to repent to draw near to God

It is time to repent and renew our faith for service

It is time to consider the profound gift God has given to the world in Jesus Christ

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So, go with me and when we return, perhaps, we'll be ready for a closer walk with God.

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- I. It is happening all too often – It's not a surprise anymore when we hear of a school shooting and see it splashed across the front pages of the newspaper.

This time – it happened Monday, March 6. A freshman, Charles “Andy” Williams is charged with 2 counts of murder, 13 counts of premeditated murder, assault with a deadly weapon and firearms possession. Faces up to 500 years in prison. This boy – only a freshman at Santana High School in Santee, California.

Why? Indications are that he was very unhappy.

Picked on at school – one of the scrawniest kids. Often called “dork, freak, nerd”

Andy reportedly bragged about having a gun and ‘joked around’ about taking it to school and shooting people. But, claimed he wasn't serious. Yet, two students were killed, and 11 others shot/injured.

What went wrong in Andy's life?

Why was it that Randy Gordon and Bryan Zucker died? Did they do anything to deserve their fate? Were they somehow worse sinners than we are?

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- II. On March 3rd two devastating tornados ripped across downtown Nashville and just east through Putman County. The EF 3/ 4 tornado crushed homes, businesses, overturn cars on top of one another!

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Rows of homes demolished while other ones adjacent to them looked just fine. It happened in the middle of the night so many had no time to get to a safe place. Over 25 people were killed in a matter of seconds.

Did Nashville and its residents do anything to deserve such destruction? Were the ones who died and were hurt somehow worse sinners then we are?

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- III. Flight #255

Where were you? What were you doing on August 16, 1987? On that day occurred the fatal crash of Northwest Flight #255 from Detroit to Phoenix. Captain John Maus and 1st Officers David Dodds taxied down the runway #3 and was clear to takeoff. 149 passengers and 6 crew members unknowingly awaited disaster.

After takeoff, #255 suddenly rolled right, then sharply left. Instead of climbing it was going down.

It clipped a light pole in a rent-a-car parking lot breaking off a wing spewing fuel into an engine which ignited.

Then the plane rolled left again and slammed into an embankment.

14 seconds after the flight had begun, it was over!

All but one of the 155 perished in the horrible accident.

Kurt Dobson – 28 – hometown hero

– since high school football days – most valuable player.

- Football at Central Michigan Univ. – honorable mention on football team
- Graduated 1981 with engineering degree
- Then lived in Phoenix, engaged
- In Detroit for friend's wedding, on his way home.

Mary Scott, 52 – was a mother and grandmother, returning with her grandson, Sam, to Phoenix from a few weeks of vacation with family. An aunt took Mary and Sam to the airport. Mary said in farewell, 'Don't worry. We'll be in the back of the plane. We'll be okay.'

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Cecelia Cichan –the sole survivor- 4 years – suffered broken leg, collarbone, head cuts, a fractured skull and 3rd degree burns over 25% of body – was hospitalized for 54 days. Oct 9, she boarded a flight, this time to her new home in Birmingham, Al. to live with her aunt and uncle – having lost her parents and brother in the crash of Flight 255.

At the time it was the nation’s 2nd worst aviation disaster. Why did this happen to these particular people?

What did Kent, Mary or Cecelia do to deserve this? Were they worse sinners than we?

[Pause]

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IV. Armenia

It was about 11:30 am, Wednesday, December 7, 1988 at Public School #2 in Stapanavan, a small city in northern Armenia. 15 mins. To go before recess and for teacher David Gregorian, the break couldn’t come a moment too soon. The children were unusually restless. They kept complaining about a buzzing noise that grated on their ears.

By 11:40 it had become impossible to continue the lesson. “I opened the window.” Says Gregorian, “and heard a muffled rumble. I rushed the children into the street seconds later, the school collapsed. Then the city toppled over! Half of Armenia wiped out!

A tower clock had frozen the time - 11:41 a.m. – that awful moment when Armenia was plunged into a nightmare that lasted for years to come.

The pictures from TV, magazines and newspapers are still in our minds. One that is etched in my mind, I think forever, is the on of a mother and daughter trapped under debris from a multistory apartment building. The mother was trapped lying on her back. She could only move her arms. For nearly two weeks she fed her infant jam from a 1 ½ pound jar. But that ran out before they were rescued. The baby then kept saying over and over “I’m thirsty.”. Finally, the mother cut her fingers and the child used them like a bottle to obtain the fluids needed to prevent dehydration.

Why did this natural disaster happen to the Armenians? What have these people done to deserve this?

Were they worse sinners than us?

[Pause]

These are difficult questions for us.

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In our scientific world we ask why? Why? Why? When suffering comes our way. Yet, as Christians we are troubled even by asking why. Somehow it doesn't seem right does it?

We, in part, became Christian because we wanted a God that would love us, care for us and protect us! We claim to worship an all-knowing, all-caring, all-loving God. **And we have trouble understanding how a good God can allow such things to happen.**

So, like the people of Jesus' day, we slide quietly into the assumption that since God is good, suffering and violence must be a result of sin and sinners.

Sin brings on suffering and calamity.

Is this so?

Jesus addresses this question in our scripture – Luke 13:1-9

13 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

People came to Jesus with two disasters.

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1. Galatians killed by Pilot's men as they slaughtered animals for sacrifice.

Assumed the Galatians who were known for insurrection activities were worse sinners and deserved their fate.

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2. 18 Jews were killed when a tower bring built by Pilot for an aqueduct overturned on them

Assumed these Jews were worse sinners because they were working for Pilot and being paid out of temple funds that had be confiscated by Pilot.

People talking to Jesus wanted him to affirm what they already suspected. That the one who suffered were worse sinners.

How did he respond?

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“I tell you, NO! but unless you repent you will likewise perish.”

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Clearly there is no necessary connection between sin and suffering.

All suffering and violence that strikes anyone with out reason or meaning is NOT necessarily related to one sinfulness or lack of sinfulness.

This was a new idea for the people of Jesus' day! They believed in a correlation between sin – suffering; goodness – prosperity.

And we do too – don't we? Taught to be good, eat right, stay out of trouble, and you'll have a good life.

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Then, when cancer is diagnosed, we wonder, “what have I done” or we push the patient to repenting to get healing.

When we encounter someone with AIDS – if he hadn't sinned, God wouldn't be punishing him/her

When we encounter a homeless person – if s/he would just work and stay sober then s/he wouldn't be in such shape.

We too believe in the connection of sin to suffering.

But this is just not true!

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Finally, Jesus, proves this fact to be true in his own life and death on Golgotha. The one without sin suffered and died on the cross.

Means Jesus' disciples (you and me) are forever freed from the ancient notion that

Prosperity and good health are evidence of divine favor

Poverty and sin are clear signs of divine wrath.

This means that

The victims of the Santana H.S. shooting

The victims of the tornados in Nashville

The victims of the failed flight #255

The victims of Armenian earthquake,

The victims of any other natural disaster, our human related disaster

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ARE NOT worse sinners that we are – we are all sinner before God.

Then what are we to make of such events in the world?

Jesus doesn't answer the why? He just rules out the possibility – sin and suffering are always linked.

BUT Jesus does turn his questioners and us in another direction.

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[Use these events to repent and improve our lives for if we don't then we too will perish.]

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Jesus moves from the present and physical to the eternal and everlasting. People will suffer and die but don't let yourself die forever!

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Listen says Jesus: ⁶ Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸ He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Tragedy, unmet expectations, trials in life, disappointments, suffered losses are going to happen.

How much tragedy have you seen and felt in your life?

We know several in the church are suffering from cancer.

With cancer, life becomes difficult at best. Life itself becomes uncertain.

People that suffer cancer, always wonder, “what sins have I done to bring this on?” Sometimes it is the people from the outside that insist that the sin of lack of faith keeps one sick. But neither of these are true!

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When suffering strikes, it is a time for drawing closer to God and attend to our eternal life in addition to the present.

When suffering strikes, we must face it and depend on God to see us through and use us in the process.

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When suffering strikes, while God’s mercy is still talking to God’s judgment, let us repent and give ourselves. Because it is on this conversation that our eternal salvation hangs. But let us use it to make our lives secure in God now and forever.

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Lent, tis the season for repentance and new life.

The tragedies I have told you about are sad and terrible in their own right,

But how much more terrible they become if we refuse to allow them to move us into a closer walk with Jesus and an everlasting place in God’s Kingdom. [pause]

Let the pain and suffering in your life motive your journey to true life this Lent.

Amen