

Early in my ministry, I met with a couple struck by a terrible tragedy.

They were a young couple with a beautiful one year old daughter. One day, the baby was in her crib, holding onto the bars, happily babbling away at her mother when the phone rang. The mother went to the phone, spoke to her friend for a few moments and returned to the crib. Somehow, something had shifted in the crib and the baby's neck had snapped. She was dead. It happened in a moment.

*What will I say?* I worried as I drove to their apartment. No pastoral care class can really prepare you for things like that. I'm not sure exactly what I expected to find when I arrived, what state I expected the parents to be in, but it was not what I did find.

It was as though nothing had happened. There were no tears. No upset. *Tenemos que resignarnos*, I was told. We must resign ourselves. This is God's will. God wanted our little angel in his choir. Who are we to complain? I allowed that it was alright if they felt like complaining, that this was a horrific loss. That I didn't really believe it was God's will for little babies to die like that. But the parents persisted, now with a trace of annoyance in their tone, this was clearly God's will and as a pastor, I of all people, should know that. If I had been wiser, I would have kept my mouth shut. But suddenly I became less pastor and more lawyer. I was a lawyer for the defense and I was defending God. I was defending God who had been unjustly accused of deliberate cruelty. No, God is not like that. God does not cause things like this. And there we were, grief-stricken parents permitting themselves no sign of grief and a young pastor acting as character witness and defense attorney for God.

It was only later, much later, when it occurred to me that for these parents, the idea of a God who would break a baby's neck because he wanted another angel in the choir of heaven, was preferable to the idea of a world of random evil and inexplicable suffering, a universe where horrific things occur without rhyme nor reason. The idea that this was God's will became the only thing these parents were holding onto when everything else fell away. And then came the pastor trying to take that one solid hold on reality away.

As time went on, resignation to God's will stopped working for the father who needed a place closer to home to vent his growing anger. It was the phone call. If she hadn't gone to the phone. If she hadn't been so eager to talk on the phone. If she hadn't had more interest in talking to her friend than caring for her baby. If she hadn't been such a bad, selfish mother, this would not have happened. It was all her fault. She was to blame and this, this, was the punishment. And he cast her out.

One word for this is scapegoating. In the face of catastrophe, personal or global, people look for a person or a group to cast the blame and to cast out, so that life returns to normal.

I am the descendent of such scapegoats. My Jewish ancestors were persecuted during the Black Plague because people didn't have the kind of scientific knowledge we have today and society needed to make the horror make sense. 1000s of Jews were massacred.

Scapegoating continues. Autism used to be blamed on mothers, who were labeled as refrigerator mothers. It was comforting to those who knew that THEY were not emotionally frozen to have the certainty that THEIR children could not possibly become autistic. Now mothers are not scapegoated but rather vaccines. Recently the LA wildfires were said to be the result of so many gay people in LA. The fires were God's punishment. Scapegoating.

Having a source to pinpoint blame gives us some sense of mastery over the terrible mystery of why. And if it is another person's tragedy, having a reason, figuring out what went wrong in them, can give us the assurance if we do things differently, such a calamity will never happen to us.

*At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Or to put it more bluntly Pilate murdered Galileans as they were worshipping, [Jesus] asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"*

I'm sure many of them were nodding yes to themselves. Yes, I do think they were worse. It was the Galileans fault.

*Do you think*, continues Jesus that *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?* Yes, we do think they were to blame, just like sinful New Yorkers were blamed with the Twin Towers crashed down. because if not, where does that leave us? Jesus's answer? No, I tell you. No, there is no connection between the suffering and the sin. No connection at all, insists Jesus, then he continues: BUT unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

Wait a minute Jesus. Why did you add that part? *Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.* Let's think about that. When the tower fell, when the towers fell, the people perished suddenly. In a moment. They perished perhaps, without having told that person how much they loved them, they perished perhaps without having had time to do that thing they'd been meaning to do, they perished perhaps without having forgiven that person they hold a grudge against. Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Repent has a kind of finger-shaking ring to it. But the real translation of repent is to turn around. Turn around, says Jesus, lest you perish just as they did. Return to the Lord, says Isaiah. seek the Lord while he may be found. Turn, return, the words of the prophet echo in the words of Jesus. This is not finger-shaking but beckoning. Turn around. I'm over here. On the side of mercy, not punishing judgement.

Then, to make the point in still another way, Jesus tells a story, a parable, about a fig tree. The tree is about to die without figs. Without bearing fruit.

The man who wants to cut down this fig tree says: *'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?'* I don't think it's a coincidence that Jesus' own ministry lasted three years and that he hardly saw the fruits he was hoping for. I also don't believe it was God's voice telling him he was just wasting his time with the fig tree, with us. That voice is never God's voice, not when it whispers or shouts in our ears either. Crucify him, they shouted. Cut him down. It's all over. Not God's voice. God's voice is ever the voice of mercy and hope. Leave it one more year.

In the face of senseless trauma, don't turn against others says Jesus, turn to me. Don't put down others. Cut down others. Scapegoat others. Turn to the one who comes looking for you in dust and rubble and in the valley of death. Turn to the one who also fell victim to Pilates bloody games and on whom the towers of Roman justice came crashing down. Turn to one who died as innocently as a baby in a crib. And got up on the third day on a morning that makes no reasonable sense but ultimately changes everything.

After all, we are still here, still breathing. We **have** been given more time, another year – or the span of our lives that remains. The gardener is here to tend us and the gardener is expecting fruit. We have more time, but not endless time.

And sometimes, the ripening seems to be taking forever. The fruits we long for in our personal lives and our communal lives don't appear on schedule.

How long will a grief last? How long will a grudge last? How long before full recovery comes? How long O Lord? Where is the fruit we work for, the fruit we long for? How long will it take for HC+SC and St John's to figure everything out? When will we see the fruit of more people, more money? Will growth come? New life? More justice in the public square where good fruit is being ripped from the tree and trampled under foot? What about more love and mercy and forgiveness among God's people, We want to see the fruit now and when we don't, we often look for somebody to blame or a group to blame. It's their fault. He isn't doing enough. She isn't doing enough. THEY are not doing enough. A scapegoat for our frustrations.

But the gardener does not give up. Nor should we. Listen to the prophet Isaiah. *If you remove the yoke from among you,*

*the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

<sup>10</sup> *if you offer your food to the hungry*

*and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, The Lord will guide you continually*

*and satisfy your needs in parched places*

*and make your bones strong,*

*and you shall be like a watered garden,* Maybe Mary Magdalene was not entirely wrong on Easter morning when she mistook Jesus for a gardener because not even death stops Jesus from nurturing, pruning and caring for us, his plantings.

The fig tree story reminds me of another garden story I love from E.B.White about his dying wife Katherine in the fall, planning the spring garden she knew she would not be alive to see. Here is his account: *There she would sit, hour after hour, in the wind and the weather, with dozens of brown paper packages of new bulbs and a basketful of old ones, ready for the intricate interment... directing others in where to place each bulb. There was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion—the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there could yet be another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.*

One more year. One more spring. God's mercies are new every morning.

