

**Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – January 5, 2020**

**Hymns:** 339 – He’s Got the Whole World; “In His Time”; 64 - Be still and know;  
11 – The Lord’s My Shepherd

**Scripture:** Psalm 23 (NKJV); Luke 13:1-5 (NIV)

**Sermon Title:** Reflecting, Preparing, Responding

***Psalm 23 (NKJV) - Responsive***

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

***He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.***

*He restores my soul;*

***He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.***

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;*

***For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.***

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;*

***You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.***

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;*

***And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.***

***Luke 13:1-5 (NIV)***

*About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. “Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?” Jesus asked. “Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.”*

I was watching one of those “year in review” programs on New Year’s Day, and let me tell you, it didn’t make for very encouraging viewing. Forgetting about all the political nonsense for a moment – and sadly, so much of politics seems to fall under the category of “nonsense” these days – it seems as though our planet is becoming increasingly unstable. Vast forest fires, hurricanes, typhoons, floods on one hand, drought on the other – what next?

The news then turned to a summary of the countless terrorist attacks plaguing the world, which seem so often to be targeted against those who have little to do with the issues at hand. How can people do such things to others? It defies understanding. And it is not only terrorists, but governments too are subjecting their own people to heartless cruelty. Syria, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, China, Venezuela – the list goes on, and scale is mindboggling.

Time and again, I found myself thinking how grateful I am to be living in Prince Edward Island, where we are strangers to such things. Still, I was surprised to read that Hurricane Dorian, which didn't seem too devastating locally, had a greater economic cost associated with it than the famous White Juan. While Dana and I were only without power for a few hours, it was sobering to drive past flattened corn fields on the way out to Montague – just a glimpse of how such things impact others.

Nevertheless, compared with what the rest of the world had endured, when it comes to calamity or disaster, the great majority of us on PEI have escaped the year unscathed. The things that happened on the “Year in Review” were things that happened to others. But as I watched, I could not help but think about how I would cope with such tragedy closer to home. How would I respond? Would my faith sustain me in the struggle? And where is God in the midst of it all?

As we reflect upon the year past, and prepare for the year ahead, I think it would be well worth our while to again remind ourselves of what Jesus had to say about when people are faced with calamity and tragedy – physical, material, spiritual. I think his words might help us face difficult times of our own, as well as respond more effectively when calamity befalls others.

One story Jesus tells concerns a man who finds himself doing very well in business, but whose success blinds him to the true priorities of life; when calamity looms, the man finds himself woefully unprepared:

*Jesus said, “Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.”*

*Then he told them a story: “A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, ‘What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.’ Then he said, ‘I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I’ll sit back and say to myself, “My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!”’*

*“But God said to him, ‘You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?’*

*“Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.” (Luke 12:15-21)*

The moral for this parable, which seems to address our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world very directly? Unexpected things happen in this life. Our wealth doesn't protect us. Our preparations aren't foolproof. Don't be distracted from having your heart in the right place with God. You don't know when your moment will come.

Another such story is perhaps even closer to the kind of event and destruction we witness with ever greater frequency in the news (Luke 6:46-49):

*“Why do you keep calling me ‘Lord, Lord!’ when you don’t do what I say? I will show you what it’s like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. But anyone who hears and doesn’t obey is like a person who builds a house without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins.”*

Notice: “**When** the floodwaters rise... **When** the floods sweep down.” Not **if**; **when**. The Bible is far more realistic than are we, when it comes to the inevitability of struggle, setback, disaster or pain. People in Biblical times expected hard things to befall them. They had to learn - in ways I pray we never will - what it means to live with pain, hardship and loss. Our ability to hide from the fragility of life, the inevitability of illness, even the reality of death itself, puts us at odds with the much more realistic and down-to-earth Bible.

Everyone’s favourite Psalm, “The Lord’s My Shepherd,” doesn’t say “**If** I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” It says, “**Though**.” “**Though** I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” The Psalm isn’t about the presence of God **preventing** us from experiencing calamity. It is about the presence of God **accompanying us through tragedy**; an accompaniment that makes all the difference in the world.

Nevertheless, when faced with tragedy, when confronting disaster, when struggling with illness, when broken by pain, we ask “Why?” We ask, “Why did this happen to these people, to me, to the one I love?” We ask, “How could God let this happen? How could God permit such a thing?”

Jesus was asked this very question. And the answer he gives is not the answer we expect. Not at all. From our Luke 13 reading earlier: “*About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple.*”

We have historical records relating to an event wherein Pontius Pilate had taken money from the Temple in Jerusalem in order to finance the construction of an aqueduct – a huge affront to the Jewish people and the centre of their faith (imagine Philip Brown and Dennis King getting together and raiding Zion’s offering money to offset the cost of a city sewer project. Now multiply the outrage by 100). An uproar

in reaction to this, led by a party of Galileans, was quelled by Pilate in typical brutal Roman fashion; over a dozen Galileans – neighbours, as it were, of Jesus and Peter, James and John - were brutally killed, right in the precincts of the Temple itself. A more tragic and sacrilegious thing was difficult to imagine. “What do you think about that, Jesus?” people asked. “How could God let such a thing happen, and in the very Temple itself?” Jesus’ surprising answer was to one-up his interrogators with a worse disaster: *“Yes! Or how about those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them...”*

No historical record remains of that, but we can surmise that the Tower of Siloam, part of the wall of the newly-constructed Temple, collapsed without warning, either a result of bad design, poor workmanship, or perhaps a minor earthquake (earthquakes are quite regular occurrences in Israel). The result is the same as the Galilean situation: eighteen perfectly good people, minding their own business, alive one minute, gone the next. Why do these things happen? Where is God when they do? What does Jesus say? Here’s his answer:

*“Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?” Jesus asked. “Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.” (Luke 13:1-5)*

Jesus turns the discussion back from the abstract to the concrete, from the general to the personal: “Things happen, and the people to whom they happen are no better or worse than you, and a similar calamity may well befall you next, so you better be ready.” Nowhere does Jesus say, “Bad things only happen to bad people.” Nor does he say, “Only good things happen to good people.” What he does say is, *“God makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And he sends rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong (Matthew 5:45 CEV).”* Things good and bad happen to people good and bad; the important thing is that your heart is right with God right now, because you don’t know what’s coming next, and you’ll need God to help you through.

But we can’t just stop there. Another instance found in the Gospel of John can be helpful in helping us know what to do and how to act in the face of tragedy. The story is by now familiar to you (John 9):

*As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind since birth. Jesus' disciples asked, "Teacher, why was this man born blind? Was it because he or his parents sinned?"*

*"No, it wasn't!" Jesus answered. "But because of his blindness, you will see God work a miracle for him. As long as it is day, we must do what the one who sent me wants me to do. When night comes, no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light for the world."*

In a move which would have been deeply surprising to the disciples, not to mention surprising to many of us, Jesus rejects the idea that illness or calamity strikes people because of their sin - that bad things only happen to bad people. What he does do is affirm that **our response to illness or calamity is an opportunity to bring light to the world** - our response personally, and our response on behalf of others.

The early church, God bless them, picked up on this idea right away. As we read about in the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul, faced with the calamity of abandoned children and destitute widows – the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of that society – the early believers initiated a relief and distribution program to aid widows and orphans in their distress. In another instance, faced with natural environmental disaster resulting in a famine in Jerusalem, the church collected funds from outlying area churches, thereby providing much needed money and food to the starving Jerusalemites. The church didn't sit by wringing its hands, wondering why God had caused these widows and orphans to suffer, or why Jerusalem of all places should suffer famine (nor, interestingly, did the church claim that Jerusalem was being punished for what had happened to Jesus there). Instead, **it sought to do what it could to help, and so bring light to the world, and glory to God.**

In short, from the earliest writings of the Old Testament throughout the teaching of Jesus, and carried forward by the New Testament church and beyond, the answer to why terrible things happen is an unsearchable one, and beyond our ability to comprehend. There often just isn't a satisfactory answer as to "why." But **we are called to be ready; to realize that none of us are immune to the events which befall our world; and we are warned to make sure that our hearts are right with God at all times.** *"Don't wait for tomorrow to make the necessary changes in your heart and your life!"* says Jesus. We must recognize and be reminded of the fragility of life, and the strong assurance of our faith; the valley will come, but we do not walk through the valley alone.

Secondly, it is our response to suffering and our response on behalf of others that can cause light to come in to the darkness of illness and calamity - **as we reach out with the love of God in service and response to the needs of the suffering, we**

**can be part of God’s miraculous response in our word, bringing light and life to all who suffer pain.**

Our planet is a living, breathing, changing thing, and the same forces which bring life in all its variety and fullness are the same forces which combine to bring disaster. Those disasters are multiplying as our planet undergoes unprecedented and rapid change to its climate – changes exacerbated by careless human mismanagement of resources. There are things large and small each of us can do to minimize our resource use and carbon footprint, but individually, there is little impact which results from such lifestyle changes. But we **can** be a significant part of the response to tragedy and hardship, and our response can make a difference.

One aspect of our response is through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Year after year, your generosity has resulted in significant relief provided to those subjected to suffering not of their own making. Through Humanitarian Food Assistance, Agriculture & Livelihoods, and Nutrition programs, last year over 800,000 people received life-saving help through the Foodgrains Bank – and you were a big part of that help. Zion’s participation, matched by our government through Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, last year resulted in well over \$100,000 in direct aid. That is a wonderful and effective response – and God bless you for it.

What will 2020 bring for us and our world? We do not know. But as people of faith, as followers of Jesus **we are called to be ready; to realize that none of us are immune to the events which befall our world; and we are warned to make sure that our hearts are right with God at all times.**

As people of faith, as followers of Jesus, we must remember that **our response to illness or calamity is an opportunity to bring light to the world.**

As people of faith, as followers of Jesus, as we reach out with the love of God in service and response to the needs of the suffering, **we can be part of God’s miraculous response in our world, bringing light and life to all who suffer pain.**

When it seems, as the Psalmist wrote, that *“As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more,”* remember also this: *“But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting.”*

Let us seek, in the spirit of Jesus, and in the example of the Early Church, to open our lives to the presence of God, and to open our hearts and our hands to all who suffer need. Amen.