

Whose Fault Is It?

Luke 13:1-9

The youth pastor at one of my former congregations had a cartoon taped to his office door. It pictured a little guy standing, trembling, in front of a massive desk behind which was sitting a big, big man. The little guy wore torn jeans and a T-shirt and had a leather loop around his neck holding a cross in front of his chest. His hair was messy, and his toes peeked out the front of his sandals. A stick-on name patch read, “Hi! I’m Mike! I’m the Youth Pastor.”

On the dark and imposing desk was a bronze plate boldly proclaiming, “Senior Pastor.” A caption underneath carried the senior pastor’s booming message to his underling: “I DIDN’T SAY IT WAS YOUR FAULT; I SAID THAT I WAS GOING TO BLAME YOU FOR IT!”

Something goes wrong and we need to point fingers, don’t we? In tragedies, like those that happened while Jesus was teaching in Galilee, we need answers. The despotic ruler murders some opponents and people wanted Jesus to weigh in on the tragedy. But he would not take the bait. Instead, he turned the tables.

“You want to talk blame?” he countered. “What about when blame cannot be assigned, like when eighteen workmen died on the construction site; the tower collapsed right on them! Who are you going to blame? God?”

We are right in the crowd around Jesus, aren’t we? Cancer threatens. Why me?

For some, the virus was a brief bout with a cold. For others it took half of families and left the original infectors unscathed. What kind of world is this?

In pandemics and poverty, in pain and politics, we want to point fingers. We need to assess blame.

Have you been there? Many of us have. I’ve heard one refrain again and again during my years as a pastor: “Why did God let this happen? How could God do this to us? Why doesn’t God hear my prayers?”

It is the cry of Job in the seeming meaninglessness of life made painful by compounded hurts. Do you remember the story of Job? He was one of the wealthiest men in the ancient world, with houses, servants, and treasures. He had more of everything than any person could covet.

Job was also a devout man, careful to renew his relationship with God each day. It seems, in fact, that God was rather proud of Job. When Satan came calling one time, God bragged to him about Job. “Have you seen my servant, Job?” he asked. “Now there is a man whose heart you will never own!”

Satan was not so sure. He had cracked a lot of tough nuts in his time, and he took on Job as a special challenge. “Sure, Job loves you,” Satan said to God. “But that’s because you’ve bought his soul. You give him everything he wants. Why shouldn’t he serve you? Even I would do that!”

According to the Old Testament book. God gave Satan permission to take everything away from Job, stipulating only that Satan could not harm Job’s body.

So, Job lost everything — his children, his flocks, his buildings, and his servants. He became as poor as a church mouse. Yet still Job loved God and served God openly.

Then Satan got one more shot at Job in round two. He was allowed to touch Job's body without killing him. Job began to writhe in pain. And Satan touched Job's mind so that he could no longer clearly hear God's whisper of love. Job was all alone. His wife called him stupid, his friends called him a liar and a sinner, and the world did not even call him anymore. Outside, Job's horizons had collapsed. Inside he had become an echo chamber of despair. Where was God? That is the hardest challenge in life, isn't it?

The question of Job is asked in every generation: "Where are you God?" And often, as with Job, the only answer is silence. The promises of scripture become dead fantasies. The Holy Spirit leaves and the heart grows chilly. The newspapers report events that make no sense. Where is God? Where is God when a child dies? Where is God when a mother is snatched from her family? Where is God when nuclear reactors melt down, airplanes crash, and mines collapse? Where is God?

And Satan looked down from heaven with glee. He knew that he had Job then. He knew that he would never get out of that one. He knew the cards in his hand were the winning draw. Can faith remain when God is silent? Can trust carry on when there seems to be no one at the other end of the line?

"Yes!" whispered Job. "Even though I cannot see God, even though I do not understand what is happening, even though every human wisdom tells me God's not there, I know that my redeemer lives, and with these eyes I shall see God!"

That is the deepest level of faith possible. This is what Jesus calls out to those who wonder and point fingers of blame in the faith community. There are no good answers. Job loves God not for what he gets out of it, but because it is the only way life itself makes sense. We trust in God not because we always feel the wonder of God's presence, but because, even in the most absurd turns of life, and the seeming absence of God, there is still truly nowhere else to turn.

This is why Jesus told his disciples to stop blaming and start thinking. We live in a compromised world where bad things happen, often to seemingly good people, and where logical equations of moral behaviors and expected reward outcomes leave us scratching our heads. We cannot figure out this thing. We cannot win the blame game. Ultimately, we do not find meaning and find fault in the same breath.

So, Jesus said, "Ask yourselves how you are going to live in such a world." Stop pointing fingers and start grasping for meaning and hope. When the moment of crisis comes, whether along the journey or at the point of death, what will sustain us? What will bring stability out of chaos? Where can we find footing in the rushing and destabilizing currents of life?

Somehow, by the grace of God, when we stop pointing fingers of blame and start grasping heavenly hands, the perseverance of patience carries us through, and we know the end of the matter as did Job. God will not leave us alone forever. God will answer our questions in time or eternity. God will resolve the problems of life's inequities and give us a future that evil could never manufacture. The focus of faith carries us through, until we are no longer distracted by the unanswerable because our eyes have found a better place to look.