

## “The Tower and the Tree”

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When I read our gospel lesson for today, there were two images that captured my attention. First, there is the collapsed tower of Siloam. And then there is the fig tree in the vineyard.

For the past two months we have seen many pictures of collapsed buildings dominating the media. Because of the earthquakes in Haiti and in Chile we know very well about the loss of human life and the suffering that survivors experience when buildings collapse. Almost inevitably one of the questions that comes up in our conversations is why some people escape almost without a scratch while other people lose almost everything. There are always a few loud, unfeeling, and obnoxious voices who are ready to proclaim that the suffering and the destruction is punishment for some sin committed by the sufferers, or the natural consequences of some poor lifestyle choices of either an individual, or sometimes of a whole nation. We look for someone to blame so the suffering doesn't seem to be random. We look for some reason that explains the destruction so that we can still feel that life is under control.

At first, I thought that maybe Luke was telling us about the collapsed tower of Siloam as a way to raise the question of theodicy, the question of how a good and loving God can allow such random and unexplainable suffering. But then I started to think about what towers are built for. And while towers can be decorative and ornamental to the buildings they're attached to, their main purpose is to give a defender the advantage in battle. A tower gives a broader range of vision so that you can see your enemy before they attack. A tower gives you a secure vantage point from which you can shoot arrows and drop rocks on an invading army. A tower allows you to send signals and call the alarm to allies and to friendly forces who may come to your assistance in the attack. A tower helps you to defend and maintain your power.

It was then that I remembered the other incident that the audience following Jesus raised to him along with the tower of Siloam about suffering. It wasn't an incident of people dying in an earthquake, or in a flood, or in a famine, or from old age or disease. It wasn't an incident related to human life in general. It was a very specific incident, the slaughter of Galileans by the troops of Pontius Pilate when they brought their sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem. What you may not know is that the Galileans were a

particularly subversive and unruly group who were a perpetual thorn-in-the-side for the Roman occupiers. They were always preaching rebellion and were ready to take up arms at a moment's notice to begin the battle that would drive the hated legions of the Roman empire from their homeland.

Putting the collapsed tower of Siloam together with the slaughtered Galileans in the temple, I suddenly understood that the issue Jesus is confronting is the question of why a loving God allows good people to suffer. Jesus is really addressing the consequences of what happens when we humans become focused on our own power, when we try to solve the problems before us through violent and combative ways, when we try to exercise authority over others through our own abilities, and cleverness, and brute power.

And that's when I remembered another tower in the Bible. You might remember it, too. It's a tower that we're told about in the early chapters of Genesis, right after Noah's surviving of the flood, when all the people of the earth still spoke one language and had the same words. We're told how the people got together on a plain in the land of Shinar and decided that they would build a tower built out of bricks that would reach from the earth all the way into heaven.

The people will make a name for themselves and be united in supporting the grandeur and the glory of their cultural accomplishments. At first glance, their building project seems innocent enough and laudable. But God comprehends the danger in their scheming. The tower is really their ambition and desire to put themselves into God's place ... to do for themselves what they need and desire without depending on God. The tower is really their desire to separate themselves from each other based on who is more worthy, who is closer to heaven, who has risen higher on the tower of power. God's response to the people's plan for the tower, the writer of Genesis tells us, is to stop its construction by confusing the people's language and by scattering them across the face of the earth.

In the collapsed tower of Siloam, I see the shadow of the tower of Babel. And I understand that Luke isn't just generally talking about the question of why a loving God allows good people to suffer. More specifically, Luke is warning us of the danger of suffering that comes when we humans try to take power out of God's hands, when we seek to have power over others rather than share our resources and empower each other. Jesus is telling us that the cost of our human arrogance and pride and hunger for power always results in human suffering with the most innocent and vulnerable suffering the most. In

the collapsed tower of Siloam, I see the foreshadowing of other collapsed towers – towers that boasted of the economic and military power of first world nations brought down by third-world terrorists.

The second image that captured my attention was the fig tree in the vineyard. For three years the owner of the vineyard had been going to the tree expecting to find some fruit on its branches that he could enjoy. But after three years of watering the tree, protecting the tree, giving the tree space in the vineyard that could have been planted with grapevines or other producing plants, the fig tree had produced not even one edible fig. With good cause, the owner deemed the fig tree useless and unproductive and gave orders for the tree to be cut down. Which it certainly would have been – most likely chopped up and used for firewood - except for the intervention of the gardener in the vineyard who knew something about fig trees that the owner didn't know, or who saw something in that tree that the owner couldn't see. "Sir, give the tree another year. Let me tend to it a little longer – I'll dig the ground around it, soften the soil, get air to its roots. I'll put some horse manure around it – get it more nourishment. Let's wait a little longer, give the tree some special care, work a little harder to help it, and see what it yet might produce. If after a year, it's

still not bearing figs, well and good then, you can cut it down.” In contrast to the collapsed tower that speaks to me about the disastrous consequences and suffering caused by human arrogance and pride, the fig tree speaks to me of the goodness and joy and sweet satisfaction that comes from humble service, and tireless patience, and hopeful expectation, and from deep understanding and compassion.

The unfruitful fig tree in the vineyard reminds me of another tree in the Bible. This tree is described to us in Psalm 1. This tree is planted by streams of water. Its leaves never wither. It yields a sweet and fruitful harvest in its season. It produces good abundantly its whole life through. God watches over the tree faithfully and protects and provides all the tree needs for life. There’s no question in my mind that the fig tree in the vineyard becomes just like that tree after a year of nurturing by the gardener. The psalmist compares people who meditate on and follow God’s way of love in everything they do with that tree. And the apostle Paul assures the Galatians that those who live by the power of the Holy Spirit will produce an abundant harvest of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In the unfruitful fig tree in the vineyard I see the possibilities and the potential for who you and I might become if we allow

ourselves to be nurtured by and rooted in God's love for us. While the collapsed tower speaks to me about the tragic and devastating consequences of power over others, and of arrogance, and the desire to control, the tree speaks to me about surrender, and humility, and the need to nurture and to be nurtured.

Earlier in my sermon, I made a suggestion that in the collapse of the tower of Siloam we might see the foreshadowing of the attack on the World Trade Center. In response to that world-changing attack, Tony Campolo preached a sermon to the students of Eastern College where Campolo was teaching. He started by telling the students that they were living in times that tried the human soul. They were the best of times and the worst of times. They were the best of times because of the incredible acts of heroism and self-sacrifice that were witnessed in a wide variety of ordinary citizens. They were the best of times because of the spirit of unity and patriotism that invited us to embrace the values that had given our nation its birth and to recommit ourselves to the values and principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that have undergirded our nation and made it great. They were the worst of times because of the suspicions and fear directed toward people based on their race and on their faith.

Campolo continued his sermon by talking about his concern about vengeance. He said:

*I worry about attitudes of vengeance. Vengeance is a very destructive mindset and I hear the word vengeance and the call to get revenge over and over again. “Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord, “I will repay.” And we dare not usurp the prerogatives of God at a time like this. [ I have heard many national leaders speaking about the events of the past few days and what our response as a nation should be. Some I have agreed with and some I have not. At the prayer meeting that was held under the Capitol dome on the day after the attack I heard Senator McCluskey say the most wonderful and surprising thing.] She said, ‘I pray, dear God, that you will bring those who perpetrated this evil,’ and I was waiting for her to say ‘to justice.’ But what she said was ‘to repentance.’ And that’s our hope, people. For if we keep returning evil for evil, violence for violence, then we’re not going to get anywhere. It’s only when in fact both we and they come to repentance and change our ways that a new day will dawn.*

The time has come to plant over the collapsed towers of the world with trees producing sweet, succulent, flavorful fig trees. It may take some time

for the fruit to appear. But in the hands and the nurturing of Christ who is the gardener of the vineyard – we don't need to worry about any crop failure. It's time to start planting trees of repentance and peace. And maybe planting in Siloam would be the best place to start. What do you think?