**Introduction**

There is a category of questions that technically goes under the name theodicy. A theodicy is an attempt to explain the ways of God to men. Milton’s entire Paradise Lost might technically be considered a theodicy. And there are multiple different version of them. But the most common in our days and age have been in the realm of “The Problem of Pain” or “The Problem of Suffering” or “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People.”

The logic behind all of these is something like:

Major Premise: God is Omnipotent or Good

Minor Premise: Suffering is evil

Conclusion: Since there is suffering, God must not be omnipotent, good, or fill in the blank of the trait that God can’t be.

We tend to look at things much more like Israel in the Old Testament lesson. We boldly assert that “God is not just.” We pick a fight with God and want to reject the major premises. The work of a theodicy is then either to explain why such a reduced god is ok, or to explain via some complicated reason why the apparent conflict really isn’t one. This usually boils down to something like: “God gave us free will and his omnipotence will not override that.”

But you could also go after the minor premise. Instead of picking a fight with God, you go after the experience of man. What you think is bad often turns out good. Or something like the noble truths of the Buddha – “You suffer because you want.”

But both types I think end up in roughly the same place. “You get what you deserve.” God doesn’t stop you from getting what you deserve, or what you are doing really deserves it.

**Text**

And that is how Christians often reintroduce some form of Karma. Now I think you could argue for a very weak form of Karma under natural law. If you are a thief, breaking the 7th commandment, you are likely to get caught. In the vernacular of the today – mess around and find out. But that is a weak form because we don’t all find out. And some people find out in non-linear fashion. The response being all out of proportion. Like Jean Valjean’s 20 years for a loaf of bread. No, we want a stronger form of karma. We moralize that “you get what you deserve.” And by moralizing it we can judgements of relative status on the basis of outcomes.

That seems to be what the “some who were present at that very time” were trying to assert to Jesus. They were pointing at the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And what they wanted the growing in fame Rabbi Jesus to say was – “They got what they deserved. They had huge sins which this hideous blasphemy revealed. And you are much better people than they were.”

But Jesus completely rejects this moralizing karma, this attempt to draw some line, judge those people as below it, but ourselves as above it. “Do you think they were sinners than all the other Galileans?” The implied appropriate answer being “no, you shouldn’t.” And not being confident that just the question might shame them into answers Jesus answers, “No, I tell you.” When contemplating suffering Jesus is radical about its moral content. Suffering should not send us after God. As Paul would ask, “does the pot have any right to ask of potter?” Or as God argues with Israel in Ezekiel, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked…listen to what my watchman says.” God has made the way of eternal life plain. Neither are we allowed to go after others elevating ourselves. The suffering of someone else doesn’t make plain that we are better. The only thing that Jesus allows for when contemplating suffering is looking at ourselves. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

We do not get to moralize suffering beyond it being a call to repentance. Because on any fair “you get what you deserve” scale, Jesus would say we all deserve the worst. But the way of God is the way of grace. “When the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by them.”

**Christology**

The life of Christ in these regards is a great teacher. Jesus himself was sinless, yet he suffered the cross. It was a universal complaint of both Jew and Pagan. And you still see it today in Islamic polemic. They will say, “Look at the cross. Anyone who suffered like that had to deserve it. That cannot be God.”

Yet it is exactly the Christian witness that the innocent suffering and death is what has brought us atonement with God. The sins of the world were placed on the innocent one. The one who deserved nothing, took everything. And all that is left to us is repentance and faith. “Yes, my sins caused this. And Yes, I am trusting thee Lord Jesus.” He desires not the death of the wicked, but my pardon.

And the parable that Jesus attaches is something more of a correct theodicy. What are the ways of God in regard to sin? They are not chucking Zeus like bolts from heaven. God is not making towers fall over or defiling religious rites to make clear his displeasure. These things happen in a sinful world of their own. A builder uses sub-standard concrete because it is cheaper. A governor shuts churches, but liquor stores and casinos are allowed to be open, because those are the popular gods who might prevent re-election. Pain medication is denied because rampant abuse. Suffering is Paul’s “creation groaning.” And what is God’s response? “Wait another year. Let me dig around it and put on some manure.” God’s response is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God’s response is to give the sinner every opportunity to repent and produce fruit.”

**Moral**

The words of Jesus are almost always stop looking at others and making comparisons. Nothing good ever comes from that. Instead, if you think there is something wrong with the world, or wrong with God look at two places.

First look at the cross. There is nothing that our creator has not borne himself. Jesus did not spare himself. Any faults that we might throw at God are more than carried. Do we pass that cross unheeding breathing no repentant vow?

Second, look at ourselves. What suffering have we caused? What suffering do we let continue because knowing it’s origin in our sin would be too much to bear? What suffering have we walked past in our daily walk? What suffering do we wish to inflict?

Examining our heart and turning to our savior in faith is the start of all fruitfulness.

**Eschatological**

And I think this is something that we Lutherans have shied away from too often in the recent past. We have heard “O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways” or “then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down” as creeping works-righteousness.

But the point of repentance is not so that we can keep on sinning. The point of the gospel is so that we can grow in the grace of God. That we might produce fruit. And there are a multitude of ways that you can define fruit. You can talk about the fruits of the Spirit. Which is very similar to talking about virtues. You can develop in yourself virtues. No longer being bound to sin, but being in Christ we grow up into the fullness of him. You can also talk about fruits as simply good works. Or the corporal works of mercy. The virtues I tend to think of as a way of loving God. And they certainly spill out to the benefit of others, but even Aristotle would recognize that “virtue is its own reward.” While good works are of immediate benefit to our neighbor. Fruitfulness is faithfulness toward God and love toward our neighbor.

That fig tree that produces no figs has had the good news and has been given the extra attention. But if it does not grow into maturity – when it doesn’t produce fruit – why should it take up the ground? It is not works righteousness to encourage faithfulness and love. Or to say that the lack of faithfulness and love is a serious sign.

Contrary to suffering which is not a personal sign of failure. Lack of fruitfulness is. We are meant to grow. Planted firmly in the grace of Christ given from that cross. Lent is a great time to take a personal inventory. Are we taking up space? Or are we being fruitful?