

Luke 13:1-5

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Willoughby Heights CanRC

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Read: Luke 12:35-13:9

Psalm 54:1,2,3

Text: Luke 13:1-5

Amen-song: Hymn 70:1,2,3,4

During sermon: 2Peter 3:1-13

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, disasters confront humanity with the question about God's providence and what He might be trying to tell us. Disasters: it could be something personal, like sitting alongside a window in an airplane, the window shatters and you get sucked out, a serious illness, a broken relationship, the loss of your job. It could be something communal: like the tragic accident with a Humboldt Broncos team, the wars of this world, natural disasters. When disaster strikes, questions arise. Why does God allow this to happen? What's the message, the lesson?

This morning we focus on that latter question, what's the message, the lesson? We do that especially with respect to disasters that don't touch us directly or personally, but of which we know and about which we may wonder.

Before we get to that question, first this. It's important to understand God's role correctly when it comes to disasters. There's a tendency today to excuse God from responsibility in man's suffering, and thus God's role in disasters is often misrepresented. We'll ask "Why does God *allow* something to happen?" rather than "Why does God *do* this?" God *does* good and God *allows* evil, that's how we express ourselves as we attempt to make sense of it. However, that's not how God Himself speaks in Scripture.

I think, for example, of what the prophet Amos says. Introduced with "Hear this word that *the LORD* has spoken against you", Amos (3:6) says "Is a trumpet blown in a city and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?" The answer to both questions is clear. When the alarm is sounded the people are afraid. When disaster happens, the LORD has done it. Or I think of the words Job (2:10) spoke to his wife: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" This is followed with the explicit statement: "In all this Job did not sin with his lips." Evil is received from God.

Thus we confess with Lord's Day 9: "He will also turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this life of sorrow." God sends adversity. For not only fruitful, also barren years, not only rain, also drought, not only health, also sickness, not only riches, also poverty "come to us, not by chance, but by His Fatherly hand."

Job (42:3b) said when all was said and done: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." With the Belgic Confession (article 13) we thus confess: "As to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us." But the limitations of our understanding should not have us silence and ignore what God reveals about Himself and His actions.

Disasters, evil, suffering, *nothing* happens by chance. It is *all* the Lord's doing. To quote the prophet Isaiah (45:7): "I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things."

Realizing that God's hand in evil is direct makes our questions all the more intense. It's not just a matter of wondering "Why didn't God prevent this from happening?" It's a matter of: "Why is God doing this?" "What is God trying to tell us?"

That question was put to God Himself, in the person of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, when He

walked this earth. There had been a disaster, something horrible had happened. And people had drawn a conclusion from it. One they should not have drawn. And so they had misunderstood God's message. Thus the Christ corrects the people. Back then. By means of disasters God warned Israel with a view to pending judgment. And God still uses such means.

We hear God's Word this morning, summed up with this theme: God may use extreme means to warn people. We'll consider three things. (1) How people viewed disasters. (2) How Christ viewed disasters. (3) How we are to view disasters.

1) How people viewed disasters

Our text begins with the words "there were some present at that very time." The expression "at that very time" connects back to what we read at the close of chapter 12. Luke explicitly points out that there's a direct link between the words of our text and what precedes it. Luke also notes that the people who pointed something out to the Lord Jesus were "present". This means they had heard the words Jesus had just spoken to the crowds. What we read in our text is a reaction to Jesus' words. Kind of like: "We hear You talk and it made us think of this. That's what You mean, right?"

So, to understand our text well, we need to understand what comes before it. Luke 12 tells how a crowd of thousands of people had been drawn in to Jesus (Luke 12:1). Jesus is teaching, sometimes the disciples, sometimes addressing individuals, sometimes the crowds. Our Scripture reading began midway teaching addressed to Jesus' disciples (cf. Luke 12:22). From various angles the Lord Jesus speaks of judgment and of being ready for the judgment. Luke 12:40 "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." Peter asked for some clarification: is this just for the disciples or for all. In response the Lord Jesus makes clear how His coming does not bring peace but a sword. Families will be divided, unequally. That was for the disciples. But then the Lord Jesus turns to the crowd explicitly, for they too need to hear something. And there's an angry tone in His voice. He calls the people hypocrites, fakes. They can read the signs of the weather. A westerly wind will bring rain from the Mediterranean Sea, a southerly wind brings scorching heat from the desert. But they cannot interpret the present time: the signs Jesus is performing and the teaching He is giving.

Jesus continued: When guilty, while on the way to court, settle with the accuser. Once you're in court, before the magistrate, it'll be too late. You'll end up in prison. The Lord Jesus is here saying: Right now, I'm still with you, among you. I am accusing you of sin and will take you to God, the highest magistrate. You know you are guilty, the prophets have said so for centuries. Settle accounts with Me, receive Me for who I am, put Your faith in Me. If you don't, soon it will be too late. For when I accuse you before the throne of the LORD God Almighty, He will condemn you to destruction.

Some of the folks standing by hear Jesus talk of judgment and punishment and figure they know of an example of this. There had been a number of Galileans who were making sacrifices, and Pilate had done most gruesome things. We have no other record of this event, so we have no idea what this was about. It doesn't matter. All we need to realize is how this was seen in those times. The people figured, God was punishing those Galileans. They thought, those Galileans must have been terrible people, to suffer such a judgment from God.

The Lord Jesus adds another illustration. On purpose. For the example the people bring forward has a nasty slant to it. You see, "Galileans" were despised by the Israelites in Judah. Galilee was the dark province north of Samaria. Second grade Jews who lived way too far away from the temple of the Lord. Galileans, of course God would punish such people horribly.

To show the arrogance of such thinking, the Lord Jesus presents another example of a disaster. This time, one that had happened in Jerusalem, very close to the temple. A tower at the pool of Siloam had

collapsed and killed 18 people. Of this event, too, we know nothing more. But it's not important. Our Lord's point was: even in Jerusalem disasters happen. Still, here too the people would have thought: those 18 people must have been terrible people, to suffer this punishment from God.

Yes, that's how people viewed disasters back in the days of Jesus. The Jews knew and confessed that all things are in God's hands. Disasters as well. They did not have the tendency to circumvent the issue. If a disaster occurs in the city, the LORD has done it. And Jews drew what to them seemed the logical conclusion: those struck by disaster have displeased God and are being punished by Him. It's the argument the friends of Job used. Job must have done some terrible sin to be placed in such misery by God. Or think of the question the Lord Jesus was asked, when He and His disciples come across a man who had been born blind. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind (John 9:2). That was the theology of the day: disasters are a sign of God's displeasure, so when someone experiences disaster God must be terribly upset with them for some wrong thing they had done.

What's worse is that the reasoning didn't stop there but continued. It would go something like this. "It hasn't happened to me. I haven't been murdered by Pilate. I've had no tower fall on me and kill me. I haven't been born blind. God must be happy with me. I'm doing just fine." It's the attitude of the Pharisee in that one parable of the Lord Jesus: "Lord, I thank You that I'm not like that tax collector standing over there."

Now, we today are not given to think that the disaster which struck say, the Humboldt Broncos, or the lady who died this past week because she was injured when she was almost sucked out of an airplane, that there must have been something terrible there to make God punish them. But among us there can still be that tendency to conclude from well-being and prosperity that God must be quite happy with us.

However, brothers and sisters, this the Bible does not teach this. I point to just three psalms which make this very clear.

Psalm 73. The psalmist sings: "I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind." Clearly: it does happen that godless people do well and experience no disasters at all. The absence of disasters does not automatically imply God's approval.

Psalm 23. The psalmist sings: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Clearly: it does happen that godly people do experience difficulties and disasters. Think of Job. Think of Habakkuk and Jeremiah. Think of the Lord Jesus Himself. The presence of disasters does not automatically imply God's disapproval.

Psalm 37. The psalmist sings: "Mark the blameless and behold the upright, for there is a future for the man of peace. But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the future of the wicked shall be cut off." There are indeed times where the wicked do indeed experience God's condemnation, and the righteous experience God's blessings.

It's obvious that there's no obvious correlation between disasters and God's displeasure, or prosperity and God's pleasure. Not every disaster need be a punishment from God. Not every blessing need be a reward from God. They can be, but they need not be. People should be very careful when it comes to positing a direct link between human behaviour and God's activity. You can never say as a third party that this was God's punishment for that misdeed. That can only be done sometimes: like suffering a terrible injury in a traffic accident because you were driving under the influence. But for most situations, only a person who undergoes a disaster can draw such a conclusion, or deny it. The way David acknowledged sin and consequent disaster. Or the way Job denied it.

The people thought: the occurrence of disaster automatically means that those who undergo the disaster deserved it, were objects of God's displeasure. That's wrong. But how should we see them?

2) We come to our second consideration: How Christ viewed disasters.

The reaction of the Lord Jesus is noteworthy, for at least two reasons.

First of all, the Lord does not interact at all with the matter presented to Him. He hears what is said but passes no judgment. He doesn't say whether the disaster that struck the Galileans was a punishment from God. He doesn't say "yes, it was," He doesn't say "no, it wasn't." He leaves that question alone. Same with the illustration He Himself mentioned: the death of those 18 people when a tower at the Pool of Siloam collapsed. Of course, the Christ would have known, being God. But in the context of the moment, speaking to this matter would not make sense. Among humans it's not proper to pass this kind of judgment.

However, secondly, it's not like the Lord Jesus says there's nothing to be learned from such disasters. With His reaction, the Lord Jesus clearly assumes that the Lord God is behind these events. God is teaching a lesson to all who hear of these disasters, or are maybe touched by them as they involved loved ones.

To understand the message Christ points out is present in these disasters we need to remember the context. The Lord Jesus has just said: "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!" The Christ did not come to bring peace and unity, but a sword and division. But the people refuse to understand where things are headed. They know that a cloud means rain and a south wind means scorching heat. But they don't understand that Jesus, as the Christ, is a cloud to those who believe and a scorching wind to those who refuse. Hence Jesus warned the people: if you're guilty and your accuser is taking you to court, settle out of court, or things will not go well for you. You, Israel, are guilty and I am your accuser, taking you to court before the Lord God Almighty, for refusing to receive me as the Christ. If you do not repent, God will destroy.

Those disasters are like a cloud from the west or a wind from the south: a sign of what is coming. Of what is coming, not of what already is. There was still time to repent. Life may suddenly, unexpectedly end. One moment you're on your way to a hockey game. The next moment, a semi-truck hits your coach-bus and you die. One moment you're sitting by a window in an airplane. The next moment, the engine explodes, the window is gone, you're almost sucked out of the plane, and you die of your injuries.

The question is: are you ready should God change the circumstances of your life?

The way God uses disasters, reminds me of the following. Sometimes the police will issue a graphic video of a traffic accident. For example, when you go for your airbrakes you are confronted with what could go wrong in a graphic way. Sometimes the police park the mangled mess of a car on the side of the road. That's not about saying: "What a terrible driver this person was. They got what they deserved." No. It's meant as a deterrent, as a warning. Be safe, an accident can happen quickly. Wear your seatbelt. Don't drink and drive. Don't speed.

That's the kind of lesson the Lord Jesus drew from the disasters mentioned in our text. Not the abstract lesson: those must have been horrible people. But the very direct question: it could happen to you. Will you be ready if it does? Make peace with your accuser. Repent. Soon it may be too late.

"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

3) So how are we to understand disasters? What lesson do are we to draw from what happened to that Humboldt Broncos team?

Clearly, we are not pass individual or even communal judgment. It's not ours to conclude that the team members who died must have been displeasing to God, or that there's an issue with the Humboldt

Broncos. That's God's business. We don't conclude from a marriage that derails or from a tragedy that strikes an individual, that therefore they must have done something horribly wrong. We are not to be like Job's friends.

Only if God Himself clearly indicates a direct connection between sin and disaster, is such a conclusion warranted. Said Jesus, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The context of His speaking has especially to do with how Israel was treating the Messiah God had sent. Israel as a nation, as God's people, was refusing to acknowledge God's anointed, was refusing to accept Jesus as the Christ. It angers Jesus, to be rejected by the people of God, whom He had come to save. "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished." The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70AD, that's the "perishing" of Israel for refusing to repent and recognize Jesus for who He is.

But without such a clear indication of the link between a disaster and a misdeed, we are not to pass judgment.

Rather, each disaster should remind us of our frailty and our dependence on God. A cloud in western skies points to rain. A southern wind, or for us in the BC Lower Mainland, a north-easterly – brings dryness, cold Arctic outflow in the winter, scorching heat in the summer.

Recently cellphone technology has been drafted to assist governments in issuing emergency alerts: for things like earthquakes, tsunamis, and attacks. Well, disasters are God's warning system. They warn us that things can be over, very suddenly. They warn us of the seriousness of pending judgment.

While we live, we are on our way, with our accuser, to the Most Supreme Court of all creation. Our accuser, that's the Lord Jesus. So settle with Him. Let Him be, not your accuser, but your Advocate. Be in that position of which the Catechism says (LD 19): "I eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me. He will cast all his and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but he will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into heavenly joy and glory."

Disasters warn us, so live each day, live each moment, as though it is your last on earth. Not, that we should be alarmed and anxious. Rather, we always need to be at peace with God. We should be safe in the arms of the Christ. For we do not know when the Lord will call us to Himself. And only when you are in Christ will you be safe in the Judgment.

Each disaster reminds us and warns us: God is in control and He is serious about things.

God may use extreme means to warn people.

In the days of Noah God sent a world-wide flood. It destroyed all of humanity. A judgment for the sin and violence which the abandonment of God produced.

Towards the end of his life, Peter reflects on this. Peter: he had been the one to ask whether what Jesus was saying was just for the disciples or the crowds. Jesus had addressed the crowds. And so Peter, kind of reminding his readers of what's recorded in our text, wrote the following in his final testament to the church.

Let's read it together: 2Peter 3:1-13.

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, 2 that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, 3 knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 4 They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." 5 For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, 6 and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the heavens

and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

8 But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Beloved, disasters are God's way of warning us: to avoid perishing forever, always be at peace with God.

Amen.