

# **“Transforming Disasters”**

A Sermon by Dr. Mark Smith

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Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were guiltier than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Did you see the interview with Gabrielle Giffords last week? You remember Gabrielle, the Arizona congresswoman who was shot in the head, suffered massive injury, barely survived, and is now in the process of rehabilitation, regaining her strength, and her speech, and her mind. It is very moving to see her determination, her indomitable spirit. She fights hard for every word, every step. She sees her personal disaster and she faces it head on, day after day. And they asked her, are you angry about what happened? And she seems surprised by the question, and is quick to say, no I’m not angry. She spends no time agonizing over the causes, the origins of her life as it is now. She asks what is there to be

angry about, it happened, and it's over, now the only question is how far I can go and how fast can I get there?

Another interesting part of the interview was the reaction of people who love Gabrielle. Her husband says this was something of a wakeup call for him, immediately after finishing his last space shuttle flight, he retired, determined to spend time with Gabby and support her recovery. A life changing decision for him. Also of note was how Gabby's stepdaughters responded to the disaster and Gabby's handling of the recovery. It was not spoken aloud, but the implication was that the relationship of Gabby and her stepdaughters was not always the best. But in the setting of Gabby's hospitalization and rehab, the girls saw a side of her they did not know before. They both acknowledged Gabby's spirit and resolve and bravery in the face of her disaster, and expressed newfound respect for her. It seems that Gabrielle Gifford's disaster is bringing out the best in her, and those around her.

Disasters can do that, you know, if you face them head on with courage and spunk. Disasters can change lives, and reorient families, and expose strengths. Perhaps that's why they happen? Hold that thought....

Let's look at the scripture from this morning: We hear about two types of disaster, Jesus uses both to illustrate what we do with problems, with pain. One disaster is physical; a tower being built falls and kills 18 innocent workers. We might call it a natural disaster; someone just seems to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Natural disasters - a tower falls in Jerusalem, a tsunami levels a town in Japan, a wildfire leaves homes in ashes in Bastrop, a tornado shreds a neighborhood in Joplin, a friend breaks a leg in a freak fall, a young woman gets a scary diagnosis, a baby needs heart specialists. Natural disasters, they happen every day, front page news every morning.

Jesus also talks about another type of disaster – a spiritual disaster. He relates the story of good Galilean men, perhaps even men known to Jesus, men of faith, men of worth in the community, who have their blood defiled by Pontius Pilate. A serious Jewish belief is

desecrated, disrespected. The men's death is tainted by cruel, irreverent disdain. We know about this kind of disaster too. A trusted leader betrays his friends. An honored football coach takes advantage of young children. A doctor defrauds Medicare for money. These are not disasters of weather, or fire, or physical injury. They are disasters of faith, of betrayal of that faith, of learning that our faith was misplaced, and sometimes we feel, well, we feel like a tower just fell on us.

I would like you to note a couple of things from this story about how Jesus tells us to handle disasters, both natural and spiritual. First, notice that he does not say, run away. He never says, hey, just flee the scene, and let someone else clean up the mess. No, Jesus assumes that we see the disaster, and face it head on. He never suggests we put our head in the sand, or spend large amounts of time placing blame. Dr. David Levy, the bestselling author, was here last week sharing with us his experience of prayer in his medical practice. He said, pain turns you inward, changes your focus from what is going on around you to just focusing on your own pain, your own discomfort with disaster. This inward looking caused by pain interferes with our ability to move on from it, it slows our healing.

Disasters are disasters, they are what they are, and Jesus spends no time agonizing about causes, responsibility, blame. Jesus says, don't worry about the cause, worry about what you are going to do about it. Don't flee, face the music. I have to believe that Jesus smiles, when he sees those stories of a family, standing beside the smoldering ruin of their burnt home, planning already to rebuild, already seeing in their mind's eye how they can restore their lives. Gabby Giffords didn't shrink from her disaster, didn't curl up into a ball and die. I have to believe that Jesus smiles, when he hears Gabby Gifford saying, I can do this, keep with me, push me further. First lesson in the handling of disasters, don't run away.

Second lesson is Jesus's very clear instruction – repent. This word means to change your viewpoint, change your bearings, change your orientation. Take a new course, rethink your view of life, taking into account this new reality, the new normal that is created by

this disaster. Stop, Jesus says, look around, see what God is doing, see how you can join in, and set a new direction, based on how God's spirit directs you. Jesus says, if you miss this chance, you are basically as dead as the guys that the tower fell on, you've missed a golden opportunity to blaze a new trail. This is how lives take on a new, powerful, exciting direction, and doors are opened.

Listen again to the words of the Psalm we heard this morning.

*They were hungry and thirsty, the Psalmsist writes, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.*

In each paragraph of this song, there is a sharp message, a dramatic turn-around -- stop whining, the Psalmist reminds us, in the middle of your disaster, look up, and search for God. If you are hungry and thirsty and your life is ebbing away, cry out to the Lord, and he will deliver you from your distress. Another way of saying "repent" -- make a U-turn, get a new perspective.

After hurricane Katrina, I met many families who moved to our area, leaving behind their old neighborhoods in Louisiana. They saw that their old lives were gone, but they didn't bury their heads in the sand. They looked around, saw that Texas, with its opportunities and welcoming people, were a short car ride away. And they came, they started new lives, they settled into their new reality, their new normal. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't painless, but the changes took them places they had never been, and to new lives they had never considered. And now I see them, bonafide Texans, still speaking with that South Louisiana accent, but thriving and living new lives because they repented, they turned their lives around, and trusted that God would deliver them from their distress, and he did.

I remember watching the nightly news after the Texas wildfires, about local kids who had gathered up clothing and food to take to their neighbors who had lost everything. The news announcer noted that "it seems that these disasters bring out the best in people." That's another definition of repentance, "bringing out the best in us." And it's true;

Christians seem to know instinctively that our best ideas, our best impulses, our best opportunities, are often inspired by the worst that life has to offer us.

I'm reading a book by a counselor, a medical doctor who specializes in counseling patients who have serious cancer diagnoses. These folks come to counseling to get strength to face their disease, to go forward with less fear. But the strange thing is that after they have been with this counselor for a while, they start to look on their diagnosis as a gift. They see their disaster as a chance to turn their lives around, to change their priorities, to go places and do things they might never have done without their diagnosis making their new normal. They see things they never noticed, they connected with people they had ignored, they explored life in ways they had never taken the time to do. Sometimes they described their serious, life threatening illnesses as "the greatest gift I ever got." What an odd way to think about a deadly diagnosis. Jesus would get it, and would be pleased. You got it right, he would say, repent – let the disaster bring out the best in you.

The third lesson to which I would draw your attention is that we must be willing to take this new normal, this post disaster life, and make it bear fruit. The parable of the fig tree makes clear that God expects us to use this new direction we have taken to lead us to new fruit, new life. In the current political debates, there is at sometimes a critical observation made about politicians. The phrase used is that a savvy politician would let no good crisis go to waste, in other words, make political hay out of someone else's misfortune. But Christ might say much the same thing about our disasters – don't let them be just a painful episode, turn them into a rewarding outcome, a fresh productive end to an otherwise destructive disaster. Even if it takes some time, we must make some figs out of our seemingly barren misfortunes.

You know, we have some challenges of our own to face right now, in our church family. Our congregation has been struggling for the last year to see our way clear to the future with our denomination, the Presbyterian Church, USA. Countless hours have been spent studying, learning, sharing, and discussing, and soon we will have to make a decision as a

church, where will this lead us. And in the face of these questions, these spiritual challenges, some people will run. They will say, I just can't deal with hard questions, and they will flee. That's tragic, for they will miss the chance to face life head on, and they will miss the opportunity to see God leading them, and our church, to a new normal, a future with new opportunities, and growth, and life. They will miss out on seeing God's hand on his people, seeing new doors opened -- doors we might never have imagined but for the crisis that pushed us to think in new ways. Those who flee will allow their grief and sense of loss to shut their minds to blessings they never anticipated and couldn't foresee.

Another spiritual crisis occurs when people we love and respect disappoint us, let us down, and betray us. It feels like a tower falling on us to discover that trusted friends and leaders are a little less noble, and a little more human, than we believed. We elevate people we love to high pedestals, and are crushed when it becomes clear that they are flawed, just like we are all flawed. And some folks, faced with the truth that their cherished friends are human, flee, they leave churches, they lash out at friends, they forget their history of connections with others, in their pain, they turn inward, they grieve by isolating themselves and cutting themselves off from family. This isolation is unhealthy, it delays healing, and, as we have discovered this morning, it is not what Christ calls us to do. And that's tragic, they walk away from incredible opportunities to learn, to support one another, to share the grief, and in that sharing, grow in their faith and in their relationships. Sharing, and surviving, a disaster is a powerful bond – there is great healing in telling the story of how you survived big challenges and then flourished after a disaster, whether it is a wildfire, or a tsunami, or a gunshot wound to the head, or a church family in pain.

This week, we begin the season of Advent, of preparation for celebrating the birth of Christ. And we are reminded of the story of another challenge, a personal crisis. It is the story of a young mother named Mary who finds herself unmarried, and pregnant, a personal disaster. And she has some choices – she could flee, move to another community, hide herself and run from her situation. Initially she is troubled by her

disaster and she cries out, how can this be? And then she makes a critical decision, a decision to face this crisis, and see where God can take her with it. She decides to listen to God, and to search for his will for her and her family. When she embraces her new normal, she sees God moving and she is drawn into His plan for her, and for the world. She describes it in her own words, she says, my soul magnifies the Lord, I enlarge and expand on what he is already doing. I claim the promises he has made, and move into this new normal, perhaps a little anxious, but with confidence and peace. God has been with her so far, and she trusts him to take her further. And her trust is well placed, God changes her, and through her he changes the world. In four weeks, we will celebrate her trust, and God's revelation of himself to us through his son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Disasters, crises, natural and spiritual. They rock our world, they shake our faith, they disorient us. But Paul reminds us we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us. When we stay our course, when we resist the temptation to flee, and search for God's hand, he honors our willingness to trust him, and sends us forward with his blessings into our future – a future in which we have been transformed by our disasters.

Please pray with me: Gracious God, we confess that we don't relish facing disasters, we dread having to deal with them. But we also confess that you have shown us how to face them, and rethink our priorities, and then make good come from them. Move our hearts by your spirit to see your hand in our lives, even in our disasters, and walk beside us as we are transformed. Amen.