

**Luke 13:1-9**  
***"Finding God Out of Season"***

March 24, 2019  
Rev. David Pierce

*"At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."*

Luke doesn't tell us who it is exactly that has come to Jesus to tell him about this thing Pilate has done—mixing Galilean blood with their sacrifices. Luke tells us only that it happened "at that very time." Do you know what time that is? It's that time when you've had enough, when you've decided you can't take it anymore. You've watched things go from bad to worse for the last time. You've stood by while the people who are supposed to be in charge—the ones who are supposed to know better—have screwed up yet again. Your eyes and ears can hardly believe what's going on. That's it, you decide. I'm going to go find Jesus. He'll understand my frustration. He'll share my anger. I'll tell him, "Jesus, you're not going to believe this! You're not going to believe what he did this time, and he'll say, you're right, he is absolutely terrible."

Except that's not at all what happens. For this group of unnamed citizens, who come to Jesus looking for a little sympathy, a little validation for their concern over what Pilate has done—"Man, Jesus, did you hear what he did with the Galilean blood; mixing it with our sacrifices and all?"—they get instead not just a little blowback. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than anyone else living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

It's not hard to see that what Pilate has done is pretty bad, for anytime we're talking about the mixing of blood, it can't be good. What exactly, though, has Pilate done, and how bad is it? He's gone and murdered some Jews from Galilee while they were in worship. While they were at the altar slaughtering a ram or such to offer to God, Pilate comes along and slaughters them. It's an absolute anathema. It's what we in our time have come to call a national tragedy. Racially and religiously motivated hate, leading to unprecedented violence.

What is more, for this group of fellow Jews who have come to Jesus to tell him about it, it presents something of a deep theological conflict. For every Jew going all the way back to Moses knows what the word of God says. Leviticus chapter 4: “And God said to Moses, ‘Whenever you make a sacrifice to me at the altar, you shall use an unblemished ram. The priest shall dip his finger in the blood of the ram and place it around the horns of the altar, and the rest of the blood shall be poured out on the ground. Burn up the meat but don’t burn up the blood. Take care what you do with the blood.’” And from Genesis 4: the tragic brotherly tale of Cain and Abel. And one day Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him, and the blood of Abel poured out on the ground.” Uh oh. Now what’s Cain going to do? God comes along and asks him, “Where’s your brother?”

“I don’t know where my brother is. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain tries to ask.

And God says, “I know where your brother is. Listen; the blood of your brother cries out from the ground.”

Take care what you do with the blood. For page after page of every great religious text—from the Bible to the Koran—says the blood is sacred. The blood is life.

Now I have to tell you something, and this may be hard to believe, but I have *no idea* what an unblemished ram is. I’m not an expert on ancient Jewish sacrificial rites. I read Leviticus chapter 4 and I can’t tell you what God means in telling Moses to have the priest dip his finger in the ram’s—the unblemished ram’s—blood, and to place it on the horns of the altar. I don’t know why it’s so important to God that the rest of the blood gets poured out, and not burned up. What I do know is that blood is sacred. Blood is life. And when we take it, either from ourselves or from another, we are saying, this life isn’t sacred. To take blood, you have to make a cut, and to take a cut is to remove some piece of ourselves. It is to essentially become less than we were a minute ago. Less than whole. And less than holy, because it is to think less of ourselves than God does.

Few things are more tragic to me than when I hear of a person who has taken to cutting themselves. I don’t claim to understand all of the reasons—or any of the reasons—for why someone might feel the need to do this. I was told once by a young girl who had hundreds of tiny razor blade nicks on her forearms that it gave her a sense of control over a certain pain in her mind and body that otherwise felt out of control. That it’s a bit like a

person who is hemorrhaging inside and the only way to relieve the pressure is to make a cut and bleed out. That not feeling like we can add up to who we want to be, or having bought into some false narrative about who we're supposed to be, we instead cut away at ourselves. We take blood and make less of ourselves. We do as Cain did to Abel, when he not only killed his brother but then also buried him 6 feet underground. We try to erase the evidence of who we are and of the mess we've made of our lives and the lives of others. What brother, we ask? I don't belong to any brother, and no brother belongs to me. But it won't work. "Listen," God says, "your brother's blood cries out from the ground." Because while we may try to forget those to whom we belong, and those who belong to us, God will not.

This must be why God tells Moses, "When you offer a sacrifice to me at the altar, don't burn up the blood. Take care what you do with the blood." For the blood stands as a reminder of the terrible things we have sometimes done, of the life we have robbed ourselves and others of. However, the blood also stands as a witness to the God of Abel, the God who never stops hearing our cries for mercy, and who answers those cries with love.

Which brings us back to Pilate. I know, I bet you thought I had almost forgotten about him. But who can forget about Pilate and what he did to that congregation of Galilean Jews who were just trying to carry out their worship service. He took their blood. "What do you think about that Jesus? Isn't that just terrible?"

And we wait for Jesus to say, "Yes, he is absolutely terrible. We should go get him back for what he did; take *his* blood." Except instead we hear Jesus say, "Do you think that because your fellow Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than you? Or how about the 18 who were killed last week when that tower fell on them? Do you think that happened because they had something coming to them? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

What's Jesus doing here? Doesn't he know this isn't about us? This is about the other guy; it's about Pilate, and what he's done. Don't make this about us! We didn't do anything wrong here!

"No?" asks Jesus. "Are you sure? That may be true, but I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, how do the innocent die and the guilty go free? You're thinking about that tower, that plane, that massacre in the mosque, that little boy in the hospital room who's

got cancer and isn't coming out alive, that young teenage girl with the cuts all up and down her arms, and you're thinking God or the universe or both must be behind it. You're thinking you're angry and someone needs to pay."

And maybe you have a right to be angry, but I tell you this, take care what you do with blood. Or, put another way, take care what you do with your heart. Take care that you don't lose sight of the hate and hurt that lives there, because it will cut you, and cut you, and cut you, until it has killed you.

But I know what you're thinking: that it's easier said than done. For how do you forgive what feels unforgivable? How do you make a lifetime of hurt and pain stop hurting you? How do we change our instruments of death into instruments of life? Because some of us have been trying to change for a long time, and the only thing we've convinced ourselves of by now is that we can't change. How long does it take?

For you, Jesus has this final story: once upon a time there was a man who planted a fig tree in his yard; and one day he went out to pick fruit from it, only to find there was no fruit. So he said to the gardener, "Look at this thing! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and never any fruit! Cut it down! What a waste of a tree."

But the gardener replied, "Leave it alone for one more year. Let me dig around it, give it some fresh dirt and nutrients, and we'll see what happens. If it bears figs next year, great! But if not, you can cut it down."

So the next year the man goes out to see if he has any figs on his fig tree. And does he? The story doesn't say. I guess Jesus is leaving it up to us to decide how things are going to turn out for this fig tree. Amen.