Whenever something bad happens in the world you can always count on one or more Christians embarrassing themselves by explaining how that bad thing is divine punishment for an action of which they disapprove. Whether it is coronavirus or hurricane Katrina somewhere, someone will draw a straight line from a behavior to a punishment. And I do understand the impetus for such declarations. We, as humans, always want to know why a bad thing happened. This desire was even turned into a best seller in 1981 when Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” But the fact of the matter is often part of what makes an event bad or even evil is its lack of comprehension. We can psycho-analyze Vladmir Putin all day long but I don’t know if we will ever find the reason for why he is such a jerk. At least not a satisfactory reason. Even though I do think that if Putin were about four inches taller a lot of his issues might disappear. Or at least he would stop taking his shirt off and posing for calendars on horseback. Don’t google it, because you will never be able to unsee it. But I think another reason for this desire to find reasons for tragic or evil events comes from the scientific revolution and the belief that given enough time and a large enough research budget we can ultimately explain everything. And in such a culture Christianity can shift from being a great comforter to being a great explainer. It is no longer enough to say that God will be with us through the dark times, we now demand to know why the dark times happen. And to go just a little bit off track this is why I believe fatalism, the belief that all events are predetermined, is so popular in some Christian circles these days. It explains everything. When the question is asked why something happened the fatalistic answer is because God wanted it to happen exactly that way. Whether your car breaks down in the middle of I-94 or the waiter forgets to bring you a side of ranch, it is all part of God’s perfect plan. And as seemingly logical as this might seem, such a belief is not Christian. For the explanations we get from scripture about why bad things happen are a little less certain. In fact in the passage we have from Luke today, Jesus takes direct aim at the certainty that is often introduced into religion. He asks, "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 all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." And as Amy says when we get back from vacation there is a lot to unpack.

First let’s get a little context for today’s reading. Jesus brings up Pilate mingling blood with sacrifices. What he is talking about was that one-day Pilate sent some Roman soldiers to the holy parts of the temple where the animals were sacrificed and had those soldiers slaughter the Jews who were there offering sacrifices. Therefore, the blood of the Jews was mingled with the blood of the sacrificial animals. The other piece that he mentions is a little more straightforward. Basically, there was a tower in Siloam, which is a neighborhood south of Jerusalem’s old city, that collapsed and killed eighteen people. And it seems that Jesus is responding to various theories put forth by the crowd about why the people who were killed got what was coming to them. The crowd wanted some fatalism, they wanted it to all be part of God’s plan, but Jesus was not having it. He does not say, “Yeah they got what they deserved,” rather he says that they were no worse than the people who are asking the question. Meaning that it is not all so neat and tidy. There is no straight line from the unfortunate death to those people’s behavior.

Anyone who has studied German knows that the Germans are really good at building Frankenstein like words where two or more words are smashed together to form a new and very lengthy word. Like Donaudampfschifffahrtsgesellschaftskapitän, which means Danube steamship company captain. English does not quite have the genius for these types of words but now and then we do come up with one. And a fairly recent addition to the lexicon is a term know as whataboutism. If the internet is to be trusted this term originated in Britain the 1970’s and means, “the technique or practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counteraccusation or raising a different issue.” Kids tend to be geniuses at whataboutism. When you ask them if they cleaned their room, they may tell you about a friend of theirs who does not have to clean their room or that time nine weeks ago your own room was not so clean or that there are children in Gabon who are dying from lack of clean water. The point of whataboutism is to either say there are worse things then what is being pointed out or to distract from what is being pointed out. Let’s not talk about what I am doing wrong but instead talk about what other people are doing wrong. It is a much more comfortable topic of discussion.

The topic of why other people suffer is one that has a lot of fans because it both pulls at our desire to understand and has the added advantage of not being about us and our problems. But those two desires are cut off in Jesus’ response to why these people at the temple and at the tower perished. Remember he first says, “do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” In other words, there is no straight line. We live in a fallen world; bad things happen. And those bad things often defy explanation. But then he takes direct aim at whataboutism saying, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Jesus is telling them to stop their parlor games where they try to figure out just which sin is being punished and tells them instead to think about themselves and where they fall short.

We are in the season of Lent, which in many ways is the most personal of all Church seasons. It is a time when we look at and study the thing that we know best – ourselves. For we are the only thing of which we truly have insider knowledge. We may not know why a tower fell and killed eighteen people, but we do know what we were thinking when we said something unkind or judged someone harshly. Lent is a time where we are asked to work on that thing of which we have the most knowledge. We are not to distract ourselves by meditating on the sins of others but are rather asked to look at ourselves and see where we fall short and how we need God’s grace. Lent is really not about us fixing what is wrong with us but rather about us acknowledging what is wrong with us so that God can fix it. When we are in denial there is not much God can do about it. If we are always focused on the problems that are out there, we block God from working on the things that are in here. Jesus is reminding us not to worry about the things over which we have no control but to worry about that over which we, with God’s help, do have control. So, in this third week of Lent, we are reminded that we are called not to worry about everyone else’s sins, but to worry about our own sin and repent and return to the Lord so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.