

Sunday Lesson – March 20, 2022

GOSPEL: Luke 13: 1-9

“Unless You Turn to God”



Context

“Jesus seizes on two calamities that may have been subjects of recent conversation around the local watering hole—one an instance of state-sanctioned terror, one a random accident. Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no clearly apparent reason. Both kinds of events lead the rest of us to realize how precarious our existence is. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong, nothing that caused their demise. He characterizes life as just as capricious as it is (to paraphrase Hobbes) nasty, brutish, and short.” (Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-13-1-9 by Matt Skinner)

Insight

“Jesus told the Parable of the Fig Tree immediately after reminding His listeners of a tower over the pool of Siloam which unexpectedly fell and killed eighteen people. The moral is found in Luke 13:3: “Unless you repent, you will likewise perish.” To reiterate, Jesus tells the story of the fig tree, the vineyard owner, and the gardener who took care of the vineyard.

The three entities in the story all have clear symbolic significance. The vineyard owner represents God, the one who rightly expects to see fruit on His tree and who justly decides to destroy it when He finds none. The gardener, or vineyard keeper who cares for the trees, watering and fertilizing them to bring them to their peak of fruitfulness, represents Jesus, who feeds His people and gives them living water. The tree itself has two symbolic meanings: the nation of Israel and the individual.

The lesson for the individual is that borrowed time is not permanent. God’s patience has a limit. In the parable, the vineyard owner grants another year of life to the tree. In the

same way, God in His mercy grants us another day, another hour, another breath. We all live on borrowed time; judgment is near.” (Excerpts from <https://www.gotquestions.org/parable-fig-tree.html>)

Gospel Reading

“About that time some people came up and told him about the Galileans Pilate had killed while they were at worship, mixing their blood with the blood of the sacrifices on the altar. Jesus responded, “Do you think those murdered Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Not at all. Unless you turn to God, you, too, will die. And those eighteen in Jerusalem the other day, the ones crushed and killed when the Tower of Siloam collapsed and fell on them, do you think they were worse citizens than all other Jerusalemites? Not at all. Unless you turn to God, you, too, will die.” Then he told them a story: “A man had an apple tree planted in his front yard. He came to it expecting to find apples, but there weren’t any. He said to his gardener, ‘What’s going on here? For three years now I’ve come to this tree expecting apples and not one apple have I found. Chop it down! Why waste good ground with it any longer?’ “The gardener said, ‘Let’s give it another year. I’ll dig around it and fertilize, and maybe it will produce next year; if it doesn’t, then chop it down.’” The Message

What It Could Mean?

“The decisions of Pilate and Rome’s agents are not synonymous with God’s justice. Luke uses Jesus’ discourse here to prepare the audience to properly frame Jesus’ execution at the hands of Romans. Second, bad events occur that are not the result of human iniquity or divine penalty. Jesus demonstrates by reminding the audience of the eighteen people who were crushed under a tower in Jerusalem. Like those Galileans murdered by Pilate, their unfortunate circumstance does not indicate the degree of their moral depravity. They were victims of a surprising, unforeseen disaster. Jesus uses these unpredictable, unchangeable incidents to prompt his audience to change what they can—their minds.

Jesus tells them to repent (*metanoeō*)—to change their mind about their current commitments to injustice and unrighteousness. Changing one's mind in this way leads to a change in conduct. This term is the Greek translation of the Hebrew (*shuv*); the core meaning of which is “to return” or “to go back” or even “to go home.” Jesus invites the audience to adjust their current course and return to God. If they opt to not return or choose to not change their minds, they risk being ruined (*apollumi*) in the same way (*ōsautōs*) as the Galileans and Jerusalemites. Here, “same way” means “suddenly and unprepared.” Jesus is not suggesting that repentance will prevent them from a physical, catastrophic death. Rather, he is stating that changing their minds will prepare them for whatever they will experience, including producing fruit.

To illustrate his point, Jesus turns to a parable about a fig tree that has not produced fruit in three years. The significance of fruit bearing is a theme throughout Luke. John the Baptist's preaching in Luke 3:7-14 describes just, interpersonal dealings as the fruit of repentance. In the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:43-45, Jesus states that a good tree produces good fruit and similarly a good person produces good from the goodness of their heart. In the parable of the sower in Luke 8:4-15, Jesus explains that those with good hearts hear the word of God, hold fast to it, and patiently produce fruit. With this evidence, the fig tree represents the human heart.

In line with Luke's understanding of how trees' fruit reflect their nature, the barrenness of the fig tree in Luke 13 is evidence that it is already ruined. The owner (*kurios*, verse 8) tells the gardener to cut the tree down. The gardener advocates for tending the tree for one more year to determine whether it should be cut down. He proposes more advanced agriculture techniques but concedes to the owner that if the tree does not produce within a year, he will cut it down. Should the tree not produce within the year, its removal will not be a surprise. It will not catch the gardener unprepared. At that point, it would not

have produced anything for four years, and it is literally wasting the earth (*gē*).

Jesus' message is clear: do not be like the fruitless tree. Rather than focus on the gravity of others' transgressions, make sure you are producing good. Instead of assigning causality to others misfortune, ensure that you are not ignoring your own missing fruit. Jesus' words suggest that tending to one's own life and positively changing one's own mind is the best strategy to prevent or even persevere through unexpected calamity. If one refuses to do that type of work, they are already ruined.” (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org, Revised Common Lectionary, by Jeremy L. Williams*)

Readings for Further Study

- **Romans 8: 20-22/Isaiah 55: 6-7** *All natural disasters stem from man's rebellion against God/"Seek the Lord while He may be found..."*
- **Revelations 21:4; 22:3** *In new heaven and new earth there shall be no more curse*

Thought for the Day

“I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and He is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering.” ~ *Billy Graham*

A Prayer

Loving God, you give us forty days to journey into the inner mountains of our hearts and lives. Let these sacred days be a time when we seek and find you within each of us. Make this time of Lent a time to listen to your voice and be guided by your spirit. We ask through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen.**