

Honoring a Season of Preparation

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Luke 13:1-9

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At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "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."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "

Well, our text for today is not one we hear every day. In fact, we may never have paid attention to the first part of this passage. It is pretty grim, and it is hard to understand. But let me take a crack at it. Basically, those talking with Jesus wanted to know when bad things happen in our lives is it because of sin.

I know that word is not one we hear much from this pulpit, but it is in the book and in our text today. I define sin as that which separates us from the Holy One or God. I am not a hell, fire, and brimstone preacher so we are all safe today. Yet, since this is the season of Lent, it makes sense to focus on turning away from what separates us from the Holy One and cultivating those things that move us closer to God. And that is why this passage is the lectionary text for today.

Historians have no evidence that Galileans were ever killed while offering sacrifices in the Temple. Nevertheless, this story made it in the gospel. Pilate in this text was at odds with the people of God in Galilee. It was the prevailing thought during Jesus' time that if hardship came your way, it was

because somebody sinned. The bigger the sin, the more devastating the retribution and pain.

The tricky part of the belief was, it might not have been the person who was hurt, that messed up. It could have been a relative—even an ancestor from generations back. One of my favorite Hebrew bible sayings is, the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. Yes, there can be generational repercussion to things we do. But not to the extent that was believed by these first-generation believers.

Those gathered with Jesus knew the Temple crime was heinous, and they wanted Jesus to first rant against Pilate and the Roman government. They wanted Jesus to rail against the hateful, demonic act of their detractors. But Jesus was unwilling to go there.

It is easy for us to draw lines in the sand these days. It is always the other side that is making life miserable for us. The progressives blame the conservatives; the Republicans blame the Democrats; the environmentalists blame the fossil fuel hogs; the anti-abortionists blame those who believe women have a right to decide what happens to their own bodies. The unhoused blame the mega corporations in our area. And everybody blames Congress for not getting much done, except when a world war is looming.

There is always someone to blame for things we don't like. And it is easier to blame the other than to look at our complicity in the goings on of the world. But Jesus wouldn't go there. Jesus was the kind of guy that said before you talk about the speck in your neighbors' eye, you might want to take the 2x4 out your own.

And the same was true for the poor souls who died while building the tower of Siloam. It was a tragic accident, but it wasn't about sin. There may have been a major design flaw in the building plan, but the death of those who died when the tower fell was not about sin or generational retribution. That is not how our God works.

Yet it is human nature to want to know why bad things happen to us. What was the cause of the accident? What precipitated the downward spiral? Why

did she get sick? Was it drugs, abuse, poor schools, were they anti-vaxers? What was it that caused their pain? We think if we can pinpoint the cause of pain and distress, then we can take steps to avoid those potholes.

Jesus said you are asking the wrong set of questions. It is immaterial what someone else did that caused harm to themselves or others. The question is what are you doing to get your life in order? What are we doing to get our lives in order?

Then Jesus told this story about a barren fig tree to illustrate his point. A landowner had a vineyard that had a fig tree in it. We don't know how long the tree had been there, but we know the tree bore no fruit for three years. The owner of the land saw no more use for a barren fig tree and wanted to cut it down. The gardener advocated for the tree and promised to give it special care for a year. Then, if it did not produce, the owner could cut it down.

Now as a gardener, I love this story. Sometimes our plants don't grow as the seed companies or nurseries promise. At home, we have a kiwi plant that hasn't had a kiwi on in about 10 years and we keep it around. I threaten to cut it down every year, but Renee says no. So, I understand the landowner's point of view. In the heat of the summer, I ask, why am I watering this plant that produces no fruit? I don't need to see more green leaves. I want kiwis!

The fig tree in our story was using up valuable space and resources but not producing as the owner had expected. Pastor Sam Kim preached a brilliant sermon last week where he talked about the pressure to produce. He said we often give in to the pressure to produce when God is calling us to be still and just stay connected. We focus on the fruit and forget the source of the fruit.

Even though we are wonderful people created in the image of God, we don't produce sacred fruit as consistently as the Holy One would want. We have moments of loving kindness. We have glimpses of peacemaking and giving honor. We have occasions of offering grace to others, but if we are honest, we are kind of hit and miss with our fruit. In Galatians there is a great list of the fruit of the spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Yep, we're kind of hit and miss with those.

But the fig tree had an advocate—the gardener. Theologian Daniel Deffenbaugh, in *Feasting on the Word*, reminds us that we all need a gardener in our lives—someone who sees the potential in us and knows how to bring out the best in us. We call it coaching today, and it is rather trendy. The gardener was a man of grace and patience. He told the owner, leave it alone for one more year. Let me give it special attention. I will dig around it and remove the weeds. I will fertilize it, and sing to it. (OK the singing wasn't in the text) Then, if it has no fruit next year, you can cut it down.

My friends, bearing fruit takes time and intention. Sometimes it takes a year of work to see results. Other times it takes decades to see a dream come true. Our preparation may be for a new job, a new baby. We may be preparing financially to purchase a home or saving toward an emergency fund to avoid financial disaster. It takes time to prepare for the big earthquake that is sure to come our way. And it takes time to prepare for a new pastor.

Some of us are like the owner. If we don't see results in three to six months—cut it down! It is wasting resources. Throw it away and set a more achievable goal.

But we need the wisdom of the gardener, who could see the potential in the tree. We need the patience of the gardener, who was willing to pull weeds that syphoned valuable nutrients from the fig tree. Sometimes distractions pull us away from our divine purpose and destiny. When that happens, the gardener will get us back on track. We don't know what happened to the fig tree after the year of TLC. I like to think that it was loaded with figs and was spared an awful fate.

During this Lenten season let us take time to have the Divine Gardener work in our lives. We need tending. We need care. We need encouragement for the season ahead. And the simple joy of God's grace will do a good work in us, if we are open and as we keep still.

Our closing song is perfect for our theme of nurturing the promise within us.

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed an apple tree;
In cocoons, a hidden promise; butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

Please stand as you are able and let us sing, *In the Bulb there is a Flower*.
Words are in the bulletin, and it is #433 in our hymnal.