

Luke 13:1-9 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.’”

“Stuck in Unfruitful Faith”

The Third Sunday in Lent – March 24, 2019 – Luke 13:1-9/C

Probably the #1 faith question folks wonder about is, “If God is good, why do innocent little children die?” Rabbi Harold Kushner titled his classic on the topic of evil in the world, “*Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*” The quickest answer might be: God *is* good, yet innocent people die because of Sin that has entered the world, which results in “man’s inhumanity to man.” But that is probably not the answer that is really being sought. To get to that answer we would have to stop being afraid to ask the real question: “*Does God punish sinfulness? Is God a vengeful, judging God?*” While we seem to be fine assigning the blame for tragic events to God as long as they are happening to someone else, we do not seem to want to think about God giving *us* random tests, or allowing bad things to happen *to us* so that we might learn a lesson. Nope. Our God is a good God, a God of grace and mercy, comfort and hope, patience and love. But sometimes, we find that we are so stuck in the old images of a God who can’t wait to “catch us” that we hear our old guilts and bad theology instead of the freeing words of God’s steadfast love for us.

In the first part of our two-part story today, folks have shared with Jesus the news of a recent tragedy. Some of their people – Galileans – have been murdered in the Temple, and their blood has been spilled along with the blood of their sacrifices. Pilate had them killed at worship. During rituals and prayer. How horrible!

Jesus then mentions another recent disaster, where 18 people died in a construction accident when the Tower of Siloam collapsed on them. But Jesus admonishes them not to assume this was punishment for sinfulness in either case. It’s as if he is telling them not to try to make sense out of senselessness. Rather, he suggests, use these events as opportunities to be aware of your own life – and if there is repentance to be done – reconciliation and forgiveness to be sought – do not put it off, for you are never guaranteed another day. That reminds me of the old saying I saw years ago, “*There but for the grace of God, go I.*” It was as if that reminder of my own good fortune helped me truly see others’ misfortune, and come to their aid with the resources I had been given.

Death in the Temple (or the mosque/the church/the synagogue.) We know that pain ourselves. The Tower of Siloam (or floods, tornados, forest fires, terrorism.) That kind of tragedy is not confined only to the ancient world that Jesus inhabited, it is in our headlines today just as it was then.

Part two of two – Jesus continues their conversation with the Parable of the Fig Tree.

(Sidebar) Perhaps a bit about fig trees in Jesus’ time might be helpful here. Fig trees were native to the land, and were planted for their shade and their fruit, which grows off the branch blossoms first, then is followed by the leaves. It might take up to two years to produce fruit, sometimes as many as 6 years. Suffice it to say, a fig tree needs time and patience.

Now, the standard interpretation, which most of you have heard before, is that this teaching story is more allegory than parable: the Owner of the Vineyard is God; the gardener is Jesus and the fig tree is

a well-known symbol for the people of Israel. In that allegorical reading, God comes threatening to cut down the tree because it is barren. Then the Jesus figure stands up for the tree and begs for God to give it one more chance...and (assumedly) the fig tree/Israel lives to bear fruit another day. This reading highlights Jesus' intervention on our behalf, and the grace and patience of God. In fact, there is a lovely devotional piece on the back of today's bulletin that runs in that same vein. Please take it and read it.

But, what does this have to do with the experiences they brought up to Jesus in the beginning? How is Jesus' teaching illustration of the previous conversation about repentance? If we interpret this parable as an allegory, I believe we run the risk of perpetuating the idea of a Punishing God.

I realize I'm asking for some leeway here, to begin with the story and try to see it from a completely different angle. You can call this a Pastor Susan midrash (the Hebrew word for interpretation that opens up other possibilities for understanding the reading.) So here we go: what if everything in the story is exactly what the story says it is? If so, then we are dealing with the owner of a vineyard, his gardener, and a fig tree, which is well past its expected harvest date.

Why is the owner so freaked out about this one fig tree in the midst of his entire vineyard? Here are a few thoughts. What if that tree had become a bone of contention between the owner and the gardener who saw it as extra work – different tools, additional supplies – and, “who puts a fig tree in the middle of a vineyard, anyway?” Or, what if the gardener has been shirking his duties, and got caught? (He's a gardener, shouldn't digging and fertilizing have been his job?) Rather than him being a good guy, asking for grace for tree, he might be covering up his own neglect and laziness! Maybe the owner has known all along about the gardener's shortcomings, but has decided to be patient with both tree and gardener – giving him a grace period to do his job, which should bring about the desired harvest of figs.

We can learn from any of these three main roles. We can be a patient owner (with crops or the gardener.) We can be an eco-friendly gardener (appreciating a good owner who extends grace when needed) and sometimes we can be the fig tree, just needing some food for its roots. How does the story change as we consider those options? Could Jesus be saying to his followers that they are distracted by the behavior of others and not paying enough attention to the calling at hand? They will be in charge of the fruit bearing of believers...so perhaps they should be worrying about feeding them!

But, how do we know? Well, you have to spend some time with the story, and it helps to trust the storyteller, Jesus. How do **you** think these two stories connect? How are repentance, patience and our calling connected? What might God be saying to you today through these conversations from so long ago? Is God calling you to repentance today? Have you been making excuses for not feeding the faith of those around you? Especially those close in your care?

Are you avoiding a conflict, or an emotional conversation or telling a truth that might feed someone else's soul? How is God speaking to you today in towers and Temples and figs?

Or is God silent right now, perhaps inviting you to come close and just let God be with you and you with God?

We are in the midst of Living Lent, a time to practice a healthy faith, a healthy life. Where did you hear God speaking of your repentance, and asking you not to fear? Where did you hear the request to slow down and spend a few moments with the God who knows you, and continues to love you no matter what. Where will you look for what else God might be whispering to your life? It takes patience to let faith grow and bear fruit, so give God some time – to talk about your life, your work, your loves. Listen to what God is saying to you today. Now, come to the Table to receive the nourishment you need. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS