

Sermon for Lent 3 Year C – March 24, 2019

Luke 13:1-9: The God of Second Chances

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In our Gospel reading today, we hear about conversations between Jesus and his disciples that are happening as they journey to Jerusalem...on the road to the Cross.

Jesus knows that the time of his arrest, suffering, death, and resurrection is soon approaching, and we can almost detect a sense of urgency as Jesus helps the disciples understand what it means to be disciples of God in this world.

He has been speaking to the disciples about how to live as children of God on earth – through prayer, by being honest and authentic in their thoughts and actions, by being merciful to others, by trusting God in everything, and by being watchful for the coming of God's kingdom.

In the midst of this discussion, the disciples bring up a couple of incidences that had recently happened that must have been absolutely shocking, horrifying, and devastating:

They refer to Pilate slaughtering Galilean Jews as they were making religious ritual sacrifices, as well as the deaths of 18 other Galilean Jews through the tragic collapsing of the tower of Siloam.

Unfortunately, we don't have further information about these events – we don't actually know the details, such as:

Why did Pilate kill those people? And why did the tower collapse and fall on people?

So the disciples, as is typical of us humans, make the assumption that those who died must have done something wrong to deserve such punishment.

They make a causal connection here – bad things happen as punishment for sin.

And we make this assumption all the time, don't we? We want life to be orderly, for things that happen to make sense to us.

If something bad happens, we reason, well then that person must have done something wrong, and they are being punished for it. We even apply this to ourselves:

“What have I done wrong to deserve this bad thing happening to me?”

But Jesus sets the disciples (and us) straight!

Suffering and calamity are not a form of punishment.

If humans experience disasters, tragedies, accidents, misfortune, it's not because God has arbitrarily chosen to punish them for their sins, while sparing others.

Horrible things happen in this life, just as wonderful things happen.

God does not make bad things happen to people to punish them.

Yet just because suffering is not a form of punishment doesn't mean that it's completely disconnected from sin. Sin does have consequences – consequences that cause misery, pain, trauma, and even destruction.

I think of the recent shooting deaths at the mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, for example:

While they were worshipping, at least 49 people were killed and 20 seriously injured (including children) by a 28-year old man with an assault weapon.

The shooter, in his first court appearance after his arrest, flashed a “white power” sign and was later discovered to be a professed white nationalist.

The sins of racism and violence led to the suffering and deaths of innocent people.

So even though bad things that happen are not God's punishment for sin, bad things and sin do have an intimate connection.

There is one thing we can be sure of, though, and that is that God takes no delight in the suffering of God's children.

God calls us to confront sin and to eliminate the conditions that lead to sin.

After Jesus talks about sin and suffering to his disciples, he then tells them a parable.

As you may remember, in this parable, a man who owns land notices that a certain fig tree in his garden has not been bearing any fruit. The tree is at least three years old, which is old enough for it to begin producing figs. The owner feels he has been patient long enough, and in his frustration at the tree for not bearing fruit, he tells the gardener to cut down the tree – just destroy it.

Instead of just doing what he is told, the gardener appeals to the owner to allow the tree to have one more year to bear fruit; to have a second chance...

The gardener will care for the tree, and fertilize the soil all around it. If the tree still doesn't bear fruit after a year of care and nurturing, then it can be destroyed.

When we hear this parable, we tend to see God as the landowner, us as the fig tree, and Jesus as the gardener.

So we interpret this parable as God being angry and impatient with us, that we've tested God's limits for way too long, that God has finally had it “up to here” with us, that we've gotten on God's last nerve; and because of this he wants to destroy us for not bearing good fruit; as punishment for sin.

But thankfully Jesus comes to our rescue and convinces God to give us more time! To give us another chance!

But what if we look at this parable in a different way?

What if the angry landowner is us? What if, in our desire for an orderly world, a world that makes sense, we think others should be punished for their sins by experiencing bad things or even being destroyed?

(although it's interesting that when it comes to our own sins, we appeal for mercy!)

And what if the gardener in this story is God?

The God who will give that fig tree another chance and nurture it?

The God who, through infinite mercy, infinite grace, infinite love, will look endlessly for the one lost sheep, the wayward son, the one lost coin?

The God who will show mercy, who tells us to repent, but who also gives us second chances to do so?

Let's pause here for a moment and have a look at that word, "repent".

The word "repent" may conjure up images of fire and brimstone preachers. Or we may think "repent" means to say we're sorry, to feel remorseful for our sins, to promise that we'll be "good" next time.

However, the word "repent" in Greek, which is the language of the New Testament, is "metanoia".

"Metanoia" does not mean to "feel sorry" or to "promise to be good";

"Metanoia" indicates a changed mind, to adopt a different perspective, to have a new consciousness of one's own flaws and fallibilities.

Metanoia indicates a complete reorientation of one's whole being away from the traps and snares of this world...and toward God.

A complete reorientation toward God.

As we look back to our parable, in addition to repenting, Jesus tells the disciples that they are also to bear "good fruit."

What does Jesus mean by "good fruit"?

Earlier in Luke's gospel (Luke 3:11-14), John the Baptist gives specific examples of good fruit: sharing what we have with those who are without, not taking more than we need so that there is enough for others, and not cheating others out of what is rightfully theirs.

We might also remember that in his letter to the Galatians, Paul discusses "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22), which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, and self-control.

This is what "good fruit" looks like.

In our Gospel passage for today, Jesus tells us to repent and to bear good fruit;

Jesus reminds us that life is fragile, that life is a gift, and that none of us knows how much time we have. The very nature of life's fragility gives it a sense of urgency – an urgency which gives us an opportunity to grab ahold of God's graciousness.

Because, while there is a sense of urgency in Jesus's words, there's also a promise of grace – that with God there are second chances, that with God there is still time –

time to turn,

time to reorient,

time to give,

time to care for others,

time to confront sin,

time to live in the way of relationship that God intends for us.

May we all truly repent and reorient ourselves toward God as we experience God's gracious love and mercy, and God's second chances. May we all strive to bear good fruit while we look for glimpses of God's kingdom on earth. Amen.

#### References

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