

# “Looking for Fruit”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – February 28, 2021*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Psalm 122

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 13:1-9

During Will’s junior and senior year at John Carroll University, he lived in a rental house in neighborhood of University Heights where the residents were a mix of college students, young families, and older folks. One of those older residents, a widow originally from Italy, had a fig tree – about six feet high – growing in her yard. Every fall, her son would come over and dig a trench in the yard – big enough to lie that fig tree down inside – and bury it for the winter. In the spring, he would come back, dig it up, and replant it.

Now, I don’t know if you have ever had fresh figs – not those dried figs that look like prunes, the ones used to make Fig Newtons – but fresh-picked right off the tree. Typically, they won’t grow in this climate, unless – of course – you’re willing go to the trouble of burying your tree each year. Because the growing season is shorter in Ohio than in Italy, her figs were small, about the size of a big grape. When they are ripe, they are so juicy that it’s impossible to eat one without having it drip down your chin. So delicious.

There’s really nothing like fresh fruit when it’s perfectly ripe: whether a fuzzy Georgia peach or a crisp Washington apple; a ripe red strawberry or a perfectly golden pineapple. The fruit snacks in your Lenten Kits are pale reminders of the marvelous variety of God’s good creation; a smorgasbord for the senses.

These senses can be enlivened by the smell of a steak sizzling on the grill or fresh-cut grass on a golf course; the sound of birds chirping or children laughing or an orchestra playing; the color of the sky at dawn; or the warmth of sun on your exposed arms. Substitute your own favorites and each of these natural wonders symbolize God’s love for the world and for each of its inhabitants. “How wonderful are your works,” (Psalm 139:14) the psalmist says.

Often, though, we imagine God in a very different way. When hardships come, when the ugliness of tragedies strike us or others, we try to make some sense of the grief, loss, and pain. This group of onlookers to Jesus’ teaching asks him to help sort out the age-old question of how to understand human suffering. Is it punishment for wrongs committed? Are some sins or some sinners worse than others, such that they would deserve what befalls them?

They told Jesus about some Galilean Jews that Pontius Pilate had murdered in a ghastly event. We aren’t told the specifics but the sad truth is that Pilate’s regime was

notably violent and arbitrary in its treatment of those he governed. No question is stated explicitly, but one is surely implied. What does one make of this tragedy? Did the Galileans somehow deserve it? Was Pilate an instrument of divine judgment against them?<sup>1</sup>

These implied questions are met head-on by Jesus. He declares that these Galileans who suffered were no worse sinners than anyone else. He adds to their illustration one of his own. He refers to a tragic accident that took place in Jerusalem: eighteen people died when a tower fell on them. Those individuals were no worse than others. Anyone who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time can be the victim of an accident.

We have all heard – sometimes in attempts to be compassionate – many less-than-helpful explanations for suffering; sometimes blaming the victim; other times blaming God. There are a few truths we can draw from Jesus’ words here. First, suffering is not divine punishment. Jesus asks his audience: “do you really think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans;” and then, just to make sure that the crowd listening gets the point, he asks them about the folks killed by the fallen tower, “do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Again, the answer is a definitive *no*.

Second, just because suffering is not punishment does not mean that it is disconnected entirely from sin. Pilate’s murderous act of terror was sinful. The tower in Jerusalem may have been built by a fraudulent contractor. Likewise, the people who literally froze to death in Texas last week are not to blame; but fault lies with whoever failed to ensure the power grid would withstand the elements. Sin has consequences; there are all kinds of behaviors that contribute to the misery of the world. The more we confront that sin, the less suffering there will be.

All of which brings us to a third, and very important, thing we can say about this passage: God neither causes nor delights in suffering and calamity. Instead, God desires that something be done in response to it. This is where the parable about the fig tree comes in.<sup>2</sup>

Typically, this parable has been read as an allegory: God is the landowner, Jesus is the gardener, and we are the fig tree. The landowner, frustrated that his tree is not producing fruit, demands that it be cut down. Only because the gardener intervenes are we saved from paying the price for our sin; Christ’s blood on the cross becomes the fertilizer that gives us new life.

But nowhere else in Luke’s gospel do we find such a picture of an angry, vindictive God that needs to be placated by Jesus. Rather, God is portrayed as a father who awaits his prodigal son’s return, or as a woman who sweep her entire house looking for a lost coin, or as a shepherd leaving the flock in search of the wayward; with the conviction that “there is

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<sup>1</sup> Arlen Hultgren from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>2</sup> David Lose, “Suffering, the Cross, and the Promise of Love”

more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:7)

Given Luke’s consistent picture of God’s reaction to sin, then perhaps the landowner in this parable is more representative of our sense of how we think the world should work. We want things to be *fair*; and we define fair as receiving rewards for doing good and punishment for doing evil. Perhaps, the gardener really is God; the one who suggests that the ultimate answer to sin is not punishment, but mercy.

Here lies the connection of this parable of the fig tree that is spared with the first part of today’s reading: the twin tragedies of the slaughter of innocent worshippers by Pilate and the random collapse of the tower of Siloam. After commenting on these two stories taken from the headlines of his day, Jesus says, “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared equally by victims and survivors. Life’s fragility gives it urgency. Jesus emphasizes the suddenness with which death may come. Just as Pilate’s and the tower’s victims did not have the luxury of choosing the time of their demise, likewise those who are unrepentant may suddenly find that they have waited too long; that the axe is already at the trunk of the tree. If life’s fragility demands urgency, that urgency shows us life consisting of the opportunity for us to seize God’s graciousness.

The word we translate “repent” – *metanoia* – means a complete change of heart and mind, a whole new way of seeing things, being persuaded to adopt a different perspective; not a sense of regret. It’s about being transformed, not feeling guilty.

Jesus is calling his listeners to repent: to admit and be conscious of their wrongdoing in order to change their commitments, policies, and practices. If we want to overcome the larger, systemic problems in our midst, we have to address our own sinfulness first.<sup>3</sup>

This whole discussion takes place on the road to Jerusalem; as Jesus his making his way to the cross. In light of this passage – and the whole of Luke’s gospel – we might see that the cross is not about punishment for sin. Not for Jesus’s sin, but also not for ours.

That is, of course, one traditional interpretation of the cross: that because God is just, God must punish sin; but because God is loving, Jesus gets punished in our place. This theory of the cross might say more about our inadequate understanding of justice than it says about God. If so, then maybe the cross is less about punishment than about love.

Instead of imagining that God has to punish someone – that the fruitless fig tree has to be cut down; and we’re just lucky the gardener is there to intervene – what if instead we could see that God’s answer to sin isn’t punishment, but mercy. That is, in Jesus, God loves

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Fistler and Robb McCoy, *Pulpit Fiction* podcast

us enough to be one of us, to identify with us completely. In the cross, we see how far God is willing to go to be with us, and for us; even to the point of suffering unjustly and dying a criminal's death. And in the resurrection, we see that God's love is stronger than anything, even death.

So, what can we say in the face of random suffering and tragic loss? That God is with us; that God understands our pain; that violence and injustice do not have the last word in our lives and world; that God has promised to redeem all things, including even our own suffering; and that God will wait for us to turn away from our harmful actions and self-destructive habits and be drawn again into the embrace of a loving God.

This is why Jesus must go to Jerusalem; this is why we need to hear this passage in Lent as we, too, are journeying towards the cross. Like the unfruitful fig tree, which is given one last chance to respond to special treatment, we are called to see where God is at work in the world, and where God is at work in our lives; as we try to work out what it might mean for us – as God's people in this time and place – to bear fruit in the orchard or our world.

And, as we ponder these questions, we can ask ourselves: first, where do innocent people suffer; where can the victims of disasters and atrocities be found? Second, what are the ways that we, either individually or as a society, try to distance ourselves from that suffering; in what subtle ways do we assuage our guilt and relieve ourselves of any responsibility? Finally, what do we need to repent of; what do we need to do differently; in what ways do our minds, and our lives, need to change?

The parable of the fig tree offers the assurance of a respite, a pause, a chance to grow and bear good fruit. Jesus challenged those unaffected by other people's suffering to hear a call to do something different. When we hear about the poor and homeless, the lonely and the depressed, the sick and suffering; about the man still suffering long-term effects of Covid, or the woman in Texas still without running water, or the migrant family still separated, are we tempted to believe that their suffering has nothing to do with us?<sup>4</sup>

Jesus says, "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." As his followers, we are called to be gardeners, as well; lovingly tending even to the trees that are not now bearing fruit; because, who knows, given some time, given some grace, the wonderful works of God, who is looking for fruit; who is with us and is for us – even in our suffering – might just come to pass. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Woodman, "Unless You Repent, You Will All Perish"