

Sermon March 23, 2025

Luke 13:1-9 occurs a few days before last week's readings. It begins with Jesus speaking about two tragedies that had happened: one in which Galileans had been killed by Pilate, and a tower collapse in Siloam in which eighteen people died. Jesus explains that neither group did anything to cause what happened to them—they were no worse sinners than anyone else—but God is calling all people to repent or they will die just like everyone else. Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree, a tree that wasted its soil and never produced a fig but was given one more chance. Jesus reminds us that all of us are called to repent and turn back to God. Hear now the Gospel of Christ

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 round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '

Wacky Gardening

As Jesus walks towards Jerusalem, teaching and healing along the way, the people crowd around to tell him about two horrible events. These tragedies must have horrified the people, but the details have been lost to history. All we know is what is written in today's reading. We know of those lives senselessly lost 2000 years ago.

We may not know the details, but we know the feelings. All of us can think of national or personal tragedies that tear at the fabric of our faith. Many who grieve ask the same question: "Why?" "Why does this have to happen to me... to my family... my community? It just doesn't seem fair."

If we look a little deeper, there is an unspoken statement that gets to the heart of things: "I am in unspeakable pain"

"I want God to take away this pain; I'm confused, frightened, angry. I don't feel God's presence here... God doesn't seem good... God doesn't care." Sometimes we say things like this because we're actually feeling this about God. Often we say this because we are struggling to put what is unspeakable into words.

And yet God speaks to us in our unspeakable need: "Ho, all who thirst, come to the waters." No matter who we are or how deep our pain, God will provide what we need and send us out refreshed and renewed. God really is right here with us, even when we don't know it. Even in the hardest times of our lives.

Generations before Isaiah called us to the waters, God sent the people into the dry desert.

"I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt," God says, "I have heard their cry... Indeed, I know their sufferings"

God was with them, but it still took forty long, desperate years and not everyone made it to the Promised Land. Even Moses only got a glimpse from the distance.

But no matter how long deliverance takes, we can always count on one thing:

God sees us, God hears us, God knows us. And God will give us what we need to get through our unspeakable pain.

When the people come to Jesus they are seeking answers because the undeserved slaughter of innocent people is just too unspeakable.

Jesus response is a little hard to hear – instead of love and platitudes; he warns the people to repent... which literally means changing your heart and mind. Jesus tells us that the people's sin is not any greater than ours... the death and suffering is not a punishment... We are focused on the wrong thing.

Instead of trying to understand why people suffer, God wants us to focus on getting into a right relationship with God... a relationship that is found in Jesus' all-encompassing love... a relationship where our thirst is quenched because of our experiences with God, in good times and bad.

He goes on to tell a parable of a fig tree. Fig trees were very important in biblical times... they thrive in the climate and are seen as a symbol of peace and prosperity. It takes a fig tree three years before it bears fruit. An Israelite who planted a fig tree would let it grow for three years to get it to a point where it was capable of bearing fruit, then would allow it to go unharvested for three more years before coming back. Then the fruit is harvested for the next three years. The wealthy absentee landlord is actually being reasonable when he says, "this tree had its chance for nine years, and it's still fruitless." Nine years, after all, is a long time to wait to show a profit.

But the gardener, who doesn't own the land and isn't the one who benefits from its harvest – cares more about the tree than the fruit it should bear and seems more than happy to devote extra care -- a year of it -- when no law or custom requires it. And he has nothing to gain from the extra time and effort

This wacky gardener cared about the life of the tree, and saw this fruitless tree as a wounded life worth healing, not a wasted opportunity for profit in need of clearing.

And isn't that just the kind of wacky, crazy love God showers over us? Isn't that the wacky, crazy kind of love Jesus showed us from the manger to the cross to the tomb?

Because there is nothing crazier or wackier than the Easter story.

We are the wounded lives worth healing, no matter how long it takes. And we, as Easter people, know that we experience life and death... and then... unexpectedly and undeservedly... we experience new life through resurrection.

And how was this accomplished? By the needless suffering of one who loved us so much that he was willing to be nailed to a tree. He could have run... he could have hid... he could have destroyed his persecutors at any time. But instead, he chose to accept his fate... Why? For us. And in that loving act, death was transformed forever. In the light of the resurrection, we discover that the evil and suffering we experience is never the end of the story... in faith we will experience resurrection and new life. God has the final word, even in the darkest times

God sees us, God hears us, God knows us. And God will give us what we need to get through our unspeakable pain, because God has experienced that same unspeakable pain.

It is in the stories of our faith that we experience redemption. Even in the midst of suffering and evil... especially in those times... God is bringing all of creation towards justice and love, peace and wholeness.

"Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Come... drink, and you will be given all you need to go on." Thanks be to God! Amen.