

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that we're coming up on my second anniversary as your pastor. It's a good time for me to reflect on our work together, take stock, set some goals. One of my goals for my third year here is to actually utilize the one-week per year set aside in my contract for planning time. So far, I've not found the time to pull away from the weekly routine and actually plan out how our upcoming time together may go in terms of themes for worship and preaching. As I've gone through the past two years, living week to week, as it were, the set of Biblical passages that make up the Revised Common Lectionary have been a very necessary tool for me. As Lee mentioned a few weeks ago in her Children's Story, the lectionary is simply a listing of four Bible passages for each Sunday, one from the Old Testament or Acts, one from the Psalms, one from a Gospel and one from a New Testament epistle. It's an ancient tool for Christian formation – its one-year or three-year cycles have guided Christians through the Bible for centuries. Generally, I read the lectionary passages for the coming Sunday on the previous Sunday afternoon or Monday, to start my thinking about the next worship service and sermon. Some weeks, I read those verses and know immediately what course I want to follow in studying the Bible with you. That makes for a very relaxed week. Some weeks, I have a long, hard battle to determine where the sermon is going. That makes for a rather stressful week. Most weeks, though, fall somewhere in between.

This has been a tough week. I knew from the start that I wanted to follow the story of Jesus throughout Lent this year, to see how his final journey to Jerusalem spoke to our condition. This passage from Luke, though, gave me pause. It's a tough nut to crack. On the one hand, it seemed to be an unusually harsh word from Jesus – a dire warning, bad news rather than good. But then the hardness of the first five verses is followed by a parable that hints of grace. How does this all hang together, I wondered? Sometimes, a difficult passage from one section of the week's lectionary is illuminated by one of the other readings but I didn't find that to be the case this week. I wrestled with this passage until very late in the week. Even as I went through my weekly discipline of reading commentaries, articles and other sermons on the passage, I couldn't seem to get a handle on how the passage spoke to me and, more importantly, how I thought it might speak to all of us this morning.

I must confess, when I discovered the answer, I felt pretty foolish. In looking for a key to the passage in the works of all those brilliant and Spirit-filled writers, I had neglected my most basic training in exegesis. I had failed to fully consider the context of the passage. With my tongue in my cheek, I'm going to blame Stephen Langton for my failing – he's been dead since 1228, so I think I can get away with it. That medieval Archbishop of Canterbury is the one who divided our Scripture into chapters and in this section of Luke, he has cut the chicken across the bone, as my late professor, Harold Songer, used to say. To get to the sense of this passage, it's necessary to follow the thread of the story that begins in chapter 11 and is primarily told in chapter 12.

First, a bit of even broader context, and one that I was aware of before my "eureka" moment: Luke tells us in verse 51 of chapter 9, "When the days drew near for (Jesus) to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus is on the road to his death. The days are growing short for his physical life on Earth and he knows it. Along the way, he begins to come under more and more attack for what he is doing and saying. In chapter 11, he is accused of being able to cast out demons because he is in league with Beelzebub, the ruler of demons. He is invited into the home of a Pharisee for dinner and ends up in a heated argument about the externals of religion

versus the internals. In the last verses of chapter 11, we read of the end of that dinner, “When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.”

“Meanwhile,” chapter 12 begins, “the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another.” It is a highly charged situation and Jesus keeps up the pressure on those whose lives are centered on themselves, while sharing the good news with those who are hungry for it. One man in the crowd is interested in Jesus only as a referee between himself and his brother over a disputed inheritance. Jesus chastises him for his greed and tells the story of the already rich farmer who has a bumper crop. “And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” Then, Jesus switches gears and tells his disciples not to worry about their lives, but to rely on God who feeds the birds and clothes the flowers. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Jesus continues in this back and forth mode, warning the crowd to live as if the end is coming tomorrow, reassuring those who do that God has a spiritual reward for them, warning that the time is now dangerous, encouraging them to be fair and just in all their dealings.

It is at this point that someone brings up the story of the Galileans slaughtered by Pilate. This is not a story that is known to us in any other source but it’s not hard to figure out. Pilate, even more than other Roman governors, was known for his harsh rule and Galilee was a famous hotbed of resistance to Rome. Whether these particular Galileans were in open revolt or whether Pilate merely expected trouble, it is entirely within his character as we know it from contemporary historians to act in this bloody and precipitous manner. Jesus’ reference to the group crushed by the falling tower is a little more obscure. They may have been simply innocent bystanders in the wrong place at the wrong time when an ancient building succumbed to gravity. Some scholars think there is a more direct opposition to the story of the Galileans. There may be a connection between the tower of Siloam and the pool of Siloam mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. The Jewish historian Josephus records that one of Pilate’s acts that incensed the Jews was to take money from the Temple treasury to build a new aqueduct in the city. Scholars speculate that the tower of Siloam was part of that aqueduct, siphoning water from the spring-fed pool. In that case, those killed may have been workers on the project, Jews collaborating on the most hated of Pilate’s acts. Rebel or collaborator, Jesus may be saying, none is better or worse in God’s eyes. Sudden death may come to anyone of us. The question is how we are living when it comes.

Those who bring this story to Jesus are looking for his affirmation for their point of view but they are disappointed. Jesus will not give credence to the idea that bad things only happen to bad people. “Do you think that these people were any worse sinners than all others from Galilee (or living in Jerusalem)? No, I tell you.” Jesus’ understanding of the Father does not include the idea of a God who smites human beings with earthly destruction because of their actions. Nor will Jesus be diverted in his focus on those who are before him to take up the question of those who

have died in another place or at another time. In his comments on this passage, the Lutheran pastor Dan Bollerud points out, “We all seem to be concerned about how someone else might be a little bit worse than we are. Look God, over there, as we take the opportunity to do our own little dastardly deed.” But Jesus is not sidetracked. “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Again, let’s remember to whom Jesus directs this warning. Gathered are the scribes and Pharisees who were “very hostile toward him” and cross-examined him, a crowd that was willing to trample each other to see the miracle-worker, the brother obsessed with taking what belonged to his sibling. Selfishness, defensiveness, greed, finger pointing, all of these less than Godly qualities were on display in Jesus’ audience. Jesus insists that they change their lives. He is not encouraging them to wear sackcloth and ashes, or to feel guilty, or to give up something for Lent, or to sit in the corner because they’ve been bad. It’s always worth remembering: to repent, μετανοια in the Greek, is to change one’s mind, to turn around and go the other way. Frederick Buechner writes, “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying, “Wow!”” Brian Stoffregen, whose exegetical work I often find helpful, points out that μετανοια here “is in the present tense subjunctive, which implies continual action: “be repentant” or “continue to repent” or “keep on repenting.” This is not a one-shot event that saves one from “perishing,”” Stoffregen writes, “but a lifestyle of penitence.” It is, perhaps, Jesus’ reminder that we must refocus our lives on God every time we are distracted by the dominant culture or our own demons.

And what of the consequences to those who do not change, who do not seek God’s way for their lives? Again, I don’t believe that Jesus is threatening physical death. Brian Stoffregen’s careful explication of the Greek deals with this issue as well: “The word for “perishing” (απολλυμι) can refer to being physically dead,” he writes giving several Lukan examples, “however, the word is also used for being figuratively or spiritually or relationally dead or lost.” He cites other verses in Luke, the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son and, particularly, Jesus’ statement, “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” To continue in a lifestyle of selfishness and scapegoating is to move farther and farther from the love that God calls us to, it is to reject a living relationship with our Creator. When we do this, we cannot help but once again face the emptiness inside us, the “God-shaped hole” that can only be filled by the presence of God in our lives. Jesus is not threatening with consequences, he is warning. Those who refuse the gentle call of God and of God’s Christ, are the walking dead, lost from true life and their true home.

As always, with Jesus, critique and warning are paired with Good News. It is the pattern of the discourse throughout chapter 12 and it continues in this misplaced pericope at the beginning of chapter 13. Again, it may take a little work to tease out the depth of meaning that would have been evident to Jesus’ first audience. The fig tree, for example, was a well-known metaphor for Israel in the works of the prophets. The great German scholar Joachim Jeremias sheds some light on literal fig trees: “A fig-tree absorbs a specially large amount of nourishment and hence deprives the surrounding vines of their needed sustenance,” he writes. A fig tree that had not borne fruit for 3 years (a good Semitic metaphor for a complete time, by the way) could not be suffered to hang around and use up precious nutrients from the soil. Jesus looks back on his

three-year ministry of healing and preaching and sees no fruit on most trees, no response to his teaching in the lives of most who have heard him. It would be completely understandable if God gave up on the lot of them. But in Jesus' parable, the gardener begs the landowner for extraordinary measures. Jeremias wrote, "manuring a vineyard is not mentioned in any passage of the OT; moreover, as a matter of duty, the undemanding fig-tree does not need such care. Hence the gardener proposes to do something unusual, to take the last possible measures...."

There can be no doubt that Jesus is the gardener in this parable. Indeed, those of us who know the end of the story know that in just a few weeks, Mary Magdalene will confuse her Risen Lord with a gardener near the empty tomb. Like the gardener with the recalcitrant fig tree, Jesus is prepared to go to unheard of lengths to bring the people back to fruitful life. He will submit to a betrayal by one of his closest friends, to a trumped-up trial, to beating and scourging and to the most painful death imaginable, all to wake us up, to get us to turn our lives around. He will shed his blood on a dead tree, soaking the ground with his life's essence, in hopes that in his life we will find the nurturing soil to enable us to bear fruit. What sorts of fruit is our loving gardener looking for? Our brother Paul knew: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," he wrote to the Galatians. To the Ephesians, he wrote, "the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."

We are midway now in our journey through the season of Lent. Jesus is making his way inexorably toward Calvary. Where is our way taking us? Are we indeed listening for the still, small voice of God, traveling to the quietist parts of ourselves known only to God? Have we heard the soft and tender call to turn our lives around, away from selfishness and brokenness, toward loving abundance? Are we ready to bear fruit? Are we ready, like Frederick Buechner, to stop saying "I'm sorry" the past and to look to the future and say "Wow!?" Jesus offers to each of us a way to rise from the ashes of our past mistake and our past hurts, a way to find and enjoy the blessings of our loving Creator and to bring the other weary ones to rest in him and to enjoy those same blessings. The Service of Compline, the prayers for the end of the day in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, ends with this ancient prayer: "May the almighty and merciful Lord grant unto us pardon and remission of all our sins, time for amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit." Now hear the Good News! God does grant unto us pardon; God has given and will give to us the time to amend our lives. The grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit are indeed ours! We are the fig trees, tended lovingly by the great gardener, Jesus, the Second Adam who would make of us his Church a new Garden of Eden, a shelter for all the needy and all the wounded and all the lost. All that is required of us is that we live our lives for Jesus and we will bear the fruit pleasing to our God. Thanks be to God!