

Lent 3C – Repentance and the Unproductive Fig Tree

Luke 13:1-9

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Three months ago, we heard that John the Baptist was preaching a “baptism of repentance.” It was the first Sunday of Advent. Well, here we are three months later, the season is now Lent, and the topic is once again repentance. I figure that that must mean it’s a theme that we really, really need to take to heart. The Gospel reading this morning tells us that some folks who were present while Jesus was teaching asked him about an instance in which Pilate murdered some Galileans, apparently while they were involved in some religious rites. In his answer Jesus reminds them also of an incident in which eighteen people died when a tower fell on them in Siloam. Did all these people die, he asks, because of their sins?

The question can’t help but remind us of instances in our own world in which that assertion is sometimes made. Pat Robertson’s explanation, for example, for the horrible tragedy of the Haitian earthquake, was that it, as well as the whole sorrowful history of that impoverished nation, was the result of the fact that the independence of Haiti was brought about because of a purported pact with the Devil. A number of people, including the infamous Fred Phelps, of Topeka’s Westboro Baptist Church, attributed the devastation that Hurricane Katrina brought to New Orleans to, variously, the city’s alleged immorality, especially to its acceptance of homosexuality, or to the fact that five of Louisiana’s ten abortion clinics were in that city. At least one Kuwaiti official attributed the hurricane to our involvement in Iraq.

A flip side to the suggestion that God has punished people by way of such tragedies is that he protects those who put their reliance on him. An urban legend that was passed around by email at the time of the Indonesian tsunami told the story of 400 Christians who purportedly miraculously survived it because they had left the town most badly damaged in the disaster in order to celebrate Christmas, after having been denied the right to do so in town itself. Attempts to verify that story failed, but they revealed the fact that there were, in fact, Christians who actually did die in the event.

A corollary to this suggestion that disasters are punishments sent by God is the assertion that we’ll prosper if we do turn to God. The churches that promulgate the doctrines of prosperity consciousness, particularly Joel Osteen’s, are the most prominent in this regard, but it is, frankly, a pretty widely held belief. I have heard politicians, for example, proclaim that if we in the United States wish to prosper, as a nation we need to turn to God.

In reality – however we parse the relationship between one’s morality or beliefs and material success or failure, I’m afraid who is killed or maimed in a disaster, and who

survives unscathed, is always going to be a mystery. In disasters, people of faith die just as heathens do. Katrina struck the Bible believing folks of Mississippi just as it did the sophisticates of New Orleans. Indeed, the part of that marvelous city most associated with sin and sex was actually the least affected. One might even wonder, if this thesis was actually valid, why it was that the New Orleans football team became the favorite of most fans at the time of the Super Bowl? And they won it. Surely that wasn't because, having suffered from Katrina, they relied on their name being the Saints!

Then there are those that like to think that what happens to us is something that we have, on a subconscious level at least, brought on ourselves. I've heard it suggested by preachers who promulgate this doctrine that not only do we get what we deserve, somehow, whenever an airplane crashes, everyone on it has subconsciously arranged to be on it because it works off some sort of karmic debt – as if young children aboard could have acquired such a debt. Let's face it. This can be a very unkind explanation of suffering indeed.

I remember a friend of mine some years ago. A high school English teacher, she was a fellow member of a Toastmaster club. She belonged to a church that taught that by our beliefs we bring about our own destinies. A couple of weeks before dying of cancer, she remarked to me that she accepted that teaching. "I believe we write our own scripts," she told me. "But why," she wanted to know, "did I have to write such a crummy one?"

All these examples are of people who pretty clearly either have never read, or don't accept, the witness of the Bible, especially the Book of Job, which absolutely rejects a relationship between behavior, or belief, and suffering, and of the New Testament, in which, not only Jesus himself, but a number of disciples, both among his original twelve, and many later martyrs as well, suffered enormously – not for their faithlessness, but, instead, for their faithfulness.

Today's Gospel passage contains Jesus' observation that those who suffered in the examples he discussed didn't deserve it any more than any others. Pain or death may come to anyone, whether merited or not. But he doesn't stop there. What is important is to be right with God whenever it comes. Hence the link to repentance. We hear this passage during Lent because it's a time when we are encouraged to look inward, when we are perhaps more likely to be able to repent – that is, to determine to alter our behavior because of feelings of remorse for past actions.

And so Jesus goes on to speak of a fig tree that a man has in his vineyard, which, despite its name, is not an unusual place for a fig tree to have been found in Israel. We might even think of the vineyard as an orchard, with both fruit trees and grape vines. In any case, fig trees, after a year to mature, should produce fruit every year. And this owner has been coming to monitor it for three fruitless years – long enough to give it. It's just taking up valuable space in this arid land if it gives him no figs.

Better to cut it down and plant another. It's reminiscent of the passage in John's Gospel that speaks about an unproductive vine. Jesus says:

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

We might also think about the fig tree that Jesus speaks of in Matthew's Gospel:

...every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Indeed, we might think as well of the fig tree that Jesus himself encountered in his travels that didn't give any fruit. And even though it was out of season, when one wouldn't expect fruit, for its failure to produce fruit Jesus cursed it so that it withered away right there before him and his disciples.

So, wouldn't we all agree? The most logical way of thinking about the depiction of a fig tree that has failed for three years to produce any fruit at all, let alone good fruit, is that it's wasting space. Sure! Get rid of it so that a more productive tree might be planted. And it's pretty clear that Jesus is not speaking here about only figs. After all, the story directly follows the discussion about people being killed. So the fig tree surely represents people – people who fail to repent. But Jesus this time rejects the idea of discarding them. In the guise of the gardener he turns to the landowner, God. Give the tree another year, he says. I'll nurture them.

I'm reminded of the Jewish tradition of leaving an empty chair at their Passover seders intended for Elijah, who is reputed never to have died, but instead to have been carried in a chariot directly into heaven – just in case this greatest of all the Hebrew prophets should return, and come to that home to participate in the holiday observance. The point of this custom is that Jews are saying that they don't know when Elijah might return. The chair, though, is to show that they're ready whenever he might return. So also Jesus' parable of the foolish bridesmaids who fail to take oil for their lamps and, having to go out to find some, miss the bridegroom's arrival and, therefore, also miss the wedding feast. So Jesus' point is that, not knowing when it's going to be too late, we should repent now.

God will give us more time, he assures us, but only we can open ourselves to his grace so that we become ever more the image of God in which he made us. And we don't know the time of our death, or the time of Christ's return. And that, my friends

in Christ, is why this Gospel passage comes to us in this most introspective season of our church year. Whatever time remains to us either personally, until our death – or corporately, until his return – it's time right now for us to repent and make ourselves ready. AMEN