

Isaiah 55: 1-9
Psalm 63: 1-8
Luke 13: 1-9

Looking for Fruit on the Tree
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Mary R. Brownlow

So often, when we read a brief 9 verses from the Gospels, we get an interesting, but disconnected, bit of a story. Biblical scholars would call it a periscope. And a preacher can delve into those 9 verses and find lots of material. Which is fun.

But once in a while, the periscope opens with a sentence or 2 and I think, “Where did **that** come from?” What tone of voice was used there? Today’s opening sounds almost like gossip: “Jesus, did you hear the news? Oh, I was **so** horrified! Governor Pilate killed some Galilean pilgrims just as they were sacrificing at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was so horrible and **bloody!** I wonder what they had done to deserve that? Oh wait – you’re a Galilean too, right? And you’re also going to Jerusalem? OMG!” Imagine lots of eye-rolling with all the innuendo.

Jesus will have none of this sensationalism. He, I am sure, was aware of the bad things that happened in Jerusalem under Pilate. He knew all too well what occupation was like, what a reign of terror was like, and what sacrilege was. He would have been as sorrowful and angry as any of them.

But he takes all this in another direction. He doesn’t condemn Pilate or minimize oppression. He puts it all in a larger picture with a question “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the rest of us Galileans? In other words, have you found an answer to that eternal human question: “Why?” This is the first question that comes to us in a tragedy. Why did this happen? Who was at fault? Was it something I could have avoided? Was it a punishment? Why did hurricane Rita hit New Orleans and not South Carolina? Why did all those people die there? Why did a killer walk into Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston and not Morris Street Baptist Church? We want explanations.

Our reading today shows how Jesus used two specific events of his day and images of his local culture to talk about repentance and grace. The events and images in this passage would have evoked a visceral reaction from his listeners. Political violence and natural disaster affect the innocent as much as those who might be responsible. This was true then and now. Centuries later, we still ask, “Why the seeming randomness of death and destruction?”

Maybe blaming the victim has always been the default human response. In the difficult aftermath of disaster we clutch at explanations. Recovery means assigning meaning to the experience so that we can find our feet and shape a new normal. It might seem to work best when the whole community can accept this together – a collective agreement that this bad thing was inevitable, given those involved. But the cost of this kind of blame is more suffering for the group affected and a compromised society. Jesus will have none of this. He talks of a corporate response and a corporate attitude of repentance: “all of you,” he says. Jesus proclaims a kingdom where repentance is the default: a repentance that requires turning and walking onto a path of right relationship with God and with one another.

He illustrates this with a parable about a fig tree, and vineyard owner and a gardener. In this little story, repentance is a horticultural experience, with digging and fertilizing as the tools of change. The tree is given another chance to bear fruit. The gardener is given the grace to be the one who cares for the tree and makes this process possible.

When you think about it, this turns the whole question of “why” and “who is to blame” on its head. Neither the owner nor the gardener focuses on what happened to the fig tree that kept it from bearing fruit. There were no excuses, no finger-pointing, and no punishment. Instead, there was a choice to spend some quality time with this plant. And some quality manure. ☺

It seems that the repentance Jesus was talking about recognizes interdependence and shared responsibility when a tragedy happens, or an injustice is committed, or when people suffer, or growth is stunted. A process can begin as people recover, rebuild, and become fruitful. This requires careful attention and careful listening and long-term commitment.

What gets in the way of allowing this wonderful, fruitful future to unfold? I’d like to point out two factors that seem to be part of our national zeitgeist. One is our pessimism. To listen to some of the political discourse that is part of the campaign season, you would think that the country is on the verge of collapse. Fear of foreigners, fear of other countries, a sense that Americans are being trod upon by other governments: these pronouncements find many followers. As I have mentioned in another sermon, we seem to relish more than ever dystopian fiction and film: hopeful scenarios just do not seem popular. Maybe that is because we know, deep down, that hope requires the work of repentance, turning around, committing to that fig tree, fertilizing and digging and getting dirty. But, in Lent, hope is the only thing that gets us to Easter. As pastor Nancy Rockwell writes, “Preparing ourselves for Easter requires giving up our addiction to a dystopian view of our lives.”

Even prophets who are critical of the status quo hold out hope for the people of God. In the joyful poetry read this morning, the prophet describes a world of abundance, not scarcity. God speaks through Isaiah: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” God is not talking about how you, personally can be rich: that’s not the wonderful future promised. God is describing a world in which all people flourish together.

But how painful that promise may sound to some people. Because the second hindrance to the possibility and process of finding fruit on our fig tree is a chronic disregard for the poor that is also a chronic racism. How painful that phrase, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...” must sound to the people of Flint, Michigan. When they were thirsty, for 2 years they drank water from corroded pipes. It was noticeable. But complaints from the city's residents and experts about the water supply were debunked and ignored for months. Finally, last October, water sourcing was switched back from the Flint River to Lake Huron, but the damage to the pipes — and to the residents of Flint — can't be reversed, and lead levels are still high. Lead continues to leach into the water system. In an attempt to respond (to dig and to fertilize), the city and charities, including Woodside UCC in Flint, started passing out clean water, as well as filters and replacement cartridges, to residents.

Many well-meaning people around the country have actually sent cases of bottled water to Flint. But the reality is that even that gesture will have consequences for the city. The environmental impact of millions of plastic bottles being brought into the city will be vast. Now the

church's energies are going into recycling efforts to deal with the charitable gift of water. We will continue to pay for the neglect of the past. Recently I heard the pastor of the UCC church in Flint Michigan say, "American is addicted to poor people." She sees that the larger issue of this poor, predominantly African-American community becoming disenfranchised by the government and suffering health consequences remains. In her opinion, we often reverse the famous words of the prophet Micah to "do justice and love mercy" and we prefer to "love justice but do mercy." "Charity can only take one so far," says Rev. Conrad. "Justice is needed." Her words are confirmed by a national study about the effects of pollution in the USA: race and zip code are the 2 best predictors of health. The national process of repentance for the man-made disaster in Flynn, Michigan will not be a year of digging and fertilizing. It will be decades of work and care and listening to the voices of those who been marginalized.

The repentance that comes with recognizing our interdependence creates space for another chance to accompany local people as they recover and create abundance. Generosity allows us to remain ourselves. We send a case of bottled water and think we are all done. Repentance, a joyful, creative repentance, changes us forever.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us of our human limitations. In his poetry God speaks, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." We will continue to struggle with tragedy. I cannot offer you *any* good explanations for why an innocent person gets shot, or why a natural disaster takes some lives and not others. And I have had some serious prayer conversations with God that take issue with those "higher ways" and "higher thoughts." As one pastor I know said after doing a difficult funeral, she will have some pretty serious questions for God when she gets to heaven. It is hard to feel like we can't have a solid answer to "why?"

But when I think of repentance as an act of creativity and purpose, I begin to see a way forward. It will not give any quick answers. It will take a year or a lifetime of some serious horticultural effort. I will be digging and spreading manure around the fig tree for a long time. Luckily, God has given me the time, and the grace to work in the vineyard. There is a lot of praying and a lot of thinking to be done while I am there. And, of course, a lot of company. Thanks be to God for this community of repentance, mercy and love. Amen.