

Third Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
23 March 2025

Luke 13:1-9

Jesus is on the move, on his way to Jerusalem. As he walks, he teaches. "Beware of hypocrisy because whatever you say in the dark will be heard in the light. Do not fear those who can kill the body, rather, fear he who can send your soul into hell. If anyone acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before the angels of God. Don't put your trust on wealth and how many granaries full of grain you have because your life may be demanded of you at a moment's notice, and you can't take anything with you. Do not worry about anything, about your life and what you will eat or wear because life is more than just food and clothing, look at the ravens who neither sow nor reap, but God gives them whatever they need. Be dressed for action because you don't know the hours when the Master will return to his house, rather be faithful and prudent managers in charge of each other. Serve each other and know that as long as you follow me there will be divisions among your communities and you will be hated, but I will be with you always. Learn to interpret the times and settle disputes with God and others before it is too late. And then, someone interrupts his teachings to ask a question about current affairs in everybody's minds. Pilate, the Roman Procurator, has just violently quelled another insurrection and the blood of the victims was mingled with the sacrificial blood. And then, in Jerusalem, a large granary, called a tower, has just fallen, killing 18 laborers. Jesus uses the questions to teach another valuable lesson: You think you know God's ways, but it may just be that you don't know as much about God as you think.

He tells them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way at the hands of Pilate, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. The followers still believe that any tragedy that befalls you is a punishment from God for sin. Victim blaming is a common practice in Jesus' day, where many still believe that God visits the sins of an ancestor up to the seventh generation. Jesus, on the other hand, avoid getting caught up in an unnecessary political argument about the Pilate's violence or the Roman's abuses in the area. He also avoids any discussions about the religious violations involved in mixing human blood with sacrificial blood. Rather, Jesus teaches his disciples about repentance. "Do not worry so much as to what possible sin those men had in Galilee? Don't think that because they died in such way, God was punishing them for some sin. Your sin may be just as grave as

theirs. This may have been you dying under Pilate's hands. No sin is better or worse than another sin. Stop assessing the spiritual health of other people. Rather, worry about your own spiritual health. Repent and confess and God will forgive you. Remember when I told you not to fear those who can kill the body but fear the one who can send your soul into hell. This is what I was talking about".

Then, Jesus says, "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." Danger can befall on anybody at any point. Sometimes you are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Death may come as a thief in the night, suddenly, without warning. So be prepared. Be alert. Stay busy producing fruit worthy of repentance." 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 around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

This is a point he has been trying to make throughout chapters 12 and 13. Rather than being busy judging the righteousness of others, worrying about our lives, and acting like the hypocrites who try to appear more holy than they really are, we should be busy producing fruit, like the fig tree. Every tree that does not produce fruit will be cast out. We must be alert and busy producing the fruits of the kingdom. It is a fool's errand to appear more righteous than we really are. We are all sinners, each one of us. We are no better and no worse. We are all part of the same human condition and prone to the same weaknesses, abuses, temptations, and sin. Each one of us, in our own way, must seek forgiveness. We must also add whatever fertilizer our lives need to produce the fruits of our faith. This fertilizer could be repentance and confession, it can be works of piety, it can be reading and study, but it most certainly means charitable and sacrificial giving. We must be like the honorable manager who feeds the servants while the Master is away. It is our duty to care for those in need.

We see incredible grace in this passage. The Master had the right to demand that the tree be cut immediately. He had been waiting for fruit for three years, and he had received nothing. This is his tree, and he has the right to do whatever he wants to it. But the Master agrees with the worker's idea. Give it a year to produce fruit but allow the worker to do the fertilizing necessary to make this possible. I think Jesus is saying something important here. We are all living in the in-between years, we are the sandwich generation. Messiah has come and Messiah will come,

and we are the meat in between those two events. The question for the readers of Luke is, “What do we do while we wait? How do we live our lives until our Lord and Master returns? This parable offers an answer; We cover ourselves in manure. We let the Holy Spirit fertilize our lives, so that we may produce the fruit required of disciples. Now, if like the listeners of Jesus, you believe the problem is with others and not with you, if can safely point to the sinners in the audience, if you believe to are righteous, then you will fail to let the Spirit prune you and fertilize you and you will fail to produce fruit.

This is an apocalyptic reading. The end of days will come in a year (figurative time) and we have a limited time to produce fruit. So, we have choices; We can either continue to focus on the sin of others, while we fool ourselves into thinking that we are better than others, or we acknowledge the fact that we have not produced the fruit God expects from us, allow the Spirit to work within us, and endeavor to remain busy and fully engaged in the kingdom until our Savior returns.

Lent is our time to do this pruning and fertilizing. May our lord continue to work within you to make you into the kind of tree that blesses the world with its fruit. Amen!