

# Lent: A Time to Stay Fully Alive

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Lent 3

March 23-24, 2019

Luke 13:1-9

To my surprise, this past Friday the season of Lent made the front page of *The Daily Herald*: “How fasting during Lent has changed” by Madhu Krishnamurthy. (A first-generation immigrant from Dubai, and an award-winning journalist)

In the article she says that there are two kinds of fasting: the traditional giving up of meat and other foods and vices, like alcohol and gossiping. And, the giving up of other things like entertainment and social media. A seventeen-year-old Roman Catholic girl named Margaret said in the interview that she fasts from distractions “like social media and television because it is a way to give time back to God that I feel is helpful for my walk in life. Instead of just filling my time with mindless consumption, I can use that time to reflect, work or do something productive.”

Later in the article, a seventy-year-old deacon said, “Lent is not a dark time for me at all, it’s a time for getting ready... In the larger picture is a word that people don’t like to think about – repentance, which is turning away from that which is darkened and not good for you and toward something that is bright and positive. Lent is a time to stay fully alive.” [1]

Next to the article on Lent were disturbing photos of wrecked police cars and a completely different story. The caption read:

“14 times in 11 weeks State police already have been hit on the road more this year than in all of 2018, or in all of 2017.”

The long article urged citizens to pay attention, slow down, and, for the love of God (my words!), move over!

In our Gospel lesson from Luke, we hear ancient words that urged listeners to be mindful of distractions, move over, slow down, and pay attention!

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, teaching his followers and crowds along the way. Just before this reading, he spoke in parables about money and foolishness and always being prepared. He concludes by saying that those listening are missing the point of his stories: “You know how to interpret the weather, but you are clueless in understanding the signs of the times.”

Some of those with him responded, “Oh, no we are paying attention. Are you? Did you hear the news of what Pilate did to the faithful Galileans who were worshipping in Jerusalem? Did you hear about the horrendous murders?”

Jesus interprets the questions and asks, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? And what about those who died when the tower of Siloam crashed? Were they worse sinners?”

(Luke 13:2-4)

The teaching of suffering as punishment for sin was widespread in Jesus’ day. According to tradition, obedience to the Torah—the teachings of the Bible—gained blessing, and disobedience brought a curse. It was a common assumption that those who experienced pain and affliction were being punished by God either for their own sins or their ancestors’ sins.

Jesus rejects this view by asking, “Do you think they deserved their fate?”

Still we wonder and we want to know. And, still, bad things happen to good people. All of the time!

This past week a ferry capsized in Iraq leaving 94 people dead. A cyclone in Southern Africa claimed more than 600 lives. Faulty Boeing planes crashed. Hundreds of lives were lost. Church leadership abuse and cover-up sends seismic mistrust. A visceral grudge against a dead senator is aired. And still, as in Luke’s day, innocent lives are lost while worshipping.

And, we wonder, WHY? Where is God in this? We wonder who is to blame. Who will be held accountable?

Why do storms rage, planes crash, innocent children suffer? Why does disease destroy? Why is violence so virulent?

Divine retribution teaches that the world is ordered by God so everyone receives a fair outcome of reward and punishment related to his or her conduct. Good people are blessed, and evil people are punished.

By the sixth century BCE, Jeremiah, the prophet, and Job, the faithful and afflicted one, challenged this understanding. It was contrary to their experience. Divine retribution, while wildly popular, does not hold water.

The problem, as ancient as time, is called THEODICY. It is the question of God’s goodness and power in a world that is marked by disorder and evil. Theodicy is a constant concern of the entire Bible.

Theodicy is defending God’s character. We understand it. The Need and the Problem.

If only every disaster in the world or in our own life had a black box! This would help, wouldn't it? We could listen to a recording and understand what went wrong and why.

Jesus offered no black box; he offered no simplistic answers to complex questions, no quick fixes to deep troubles, no shallow thinking. Instead he offered this: Facing the reality of mystery and the limits of what we can know is not an excuse to stand still and look sad. [2]

Instead of sympathy or answers Jesus challenges the people to repent. He tells them a parable about a fruitless fig tree.

A landowner was disappointed in a pathetic fruitless fig tree, decided it was wasting space, and wanted chop it down. The Gardener asked for more time. He was sure that with time, attention, and nourishment the fig tree could bear fruit. There is hope!

It is common to assume that in the parable the landowner is God and Jesus is the Gardener. But Luke's storytelling points us in a different direction. In the story God is the Gardner who desires that the little barren tree be given more attention and more time.

In life there are terrible tragedies and calamities we cannot avoid or change. This is reality. However, we do not have to live like the fruitless fig tree in the parable: alive, but with no signs of new growth or vitality.

Instead, we are invited to join in the ancient song: "We are turning Lord to hear you; you are merciful and kind—slow to anger, rich in blessing, and with love to us inclined."

We are invited to repent, to return to the God of Jacob, Jeremiah, Job, John, and Jesus. The theme of repentance runs through Luke's Gospel like a bright golden thread. Repentance—in Greek, *metanoia*—literally means a "change of mind."

Here Jesus is urging his listeners to stop focusing on unfairness, on reward and punishment. It leads in the wrong and wasteful direction, to apathy, indifference, and stubbornness ... hard soil indeed! This way is literally fruitless. This mindset produces nothing but frustration!

In Hebrew Scripture the image of the fig tree was a metaphor for the people of Jerusalem. Justice—distributive justice—was the fruit God desired. John the Baptist continued this theme. Those listening to Jesus would have understood the metaphor. God the Great Gardener expected figs of distributive justice and mercy.

The front-page news of first-century violence and the parable of a pathetic tree remind us that there is time, and there is hope!

Lent is this time. A time of reflection and repentance. A time to pay attention, slow down, and move over. Like seventeen-year-old Margaret said, "Instead of just filling my

time with mindless consumption, I can use that time to reflect, work or do something productive.”

This time, this season we make space to consider changing our own minds.

We are invited to a new way of seeing, a new perspective, a new *Weltanschauung* or worldview. What do we need to re-set, re-store, re-view?

Repentance makes room for needed resilience. Resilience comes from the Latin *resiliens*, which mean to leap back, to rebound. Resilience is the capacity to recover from adversity and trauma, setbacks and failures. Resilience is the ability to keep going. We need resilience in order to survive, and we need resilience in order to thrive.

Resilience employs inner resources of gratitude, attachment, self-control, mindfulness, compassion, and confidence. These give us strength as we work through the weariness and pain to deal with a changing world. [3]

As people and as a congregation you are remarkably resilient. You really are! I am so grateful for this. Over all of these years together, the losses and letdowns, the changes and challenges, the diagnoses and differences have not capsized this ship. Your confidence in the Good News of Steadfast Love has kept this place of peace and justice not only above water, but moving in ministry and mission.

Together we have let go of resentments, anxieties, and regrets and allowed the Great Gardener to work with us.

Together we have discerned, discussed, and decided. We have used the time we have been given to dig around our hearts and minds, to loosen the hardened soil of narrow-mindedness, debilitating dogma, and empty hopelessness. We have helped each other build resilience.

We try not to wear each other down, but build each other up with encouragement, compassion and confidence, to accompany and befriend, to learn from and lean on each other.

When we stop standing still and staying sad, when we turnaround and change our minds, we rebuild resilience for our benefit and for the world. And our efforts do bear fruit!

Literally! We teach our children to care for and share with children and communities far away. This Lent we are raising money to purchase fruit-tree seedlings to grow and produce fruit and eventually more trees in years to come. Last Wednesday one of our sixth-grade girls told the class that she is earning dog-walking money and plans to share some of it with the fruit-tree offering.

Paul said the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, generosity. and self-control (Galatians 5:22). It is our purpose to bear these fruits, along with the juicy figs of justice and mercy.

This holy season gives us time to keep on digging, tilling, and nourishing our lives every day. Changing our minds, attitudes, and direction.

Much is unknown. Many questions in our lives remain unanswered. But, together, we trust that the future is God's. We share in the mission of the unfolding future.

We can pay attention, slow down, and, for the love of God, move over!

Our task is to labor without having all of the answers, to acknowledge the deep mystery of it all. We cannot do everything. We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds that are planted. We are workers, not master builders. Ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. [4]

With attention and nourishment, there is time!

With repentance and resilience, there is hope!

We can bear fruit.

Lent is a time to stay fully alive.

And sing...

Tree of Life and awesome myst'ry, in your death we are reborn,  
Though you die in all of his'try, Still you rise with ev'ry morn,  
Still you rise with ev'ry morn. [5]

Amen.

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#### Resources

[1] Krishnamurthy, Madhu, "How fasting during Lent has changed," *The Daily Herald*, March 22, 2019

[2] Curry, Michael B. *Feasting on the Word*, pg. 95.

[3] Hanson, Rick, Ph.D. *Growing Resilience*, [GoodTherapy.org](http://GoodTherapy.org), April 12, 2018.

[4] Curry, Michael B. *Feasting on the Word*.

[5] "Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" hymn by Marty Haugen.

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*Reflection Questions:*

- What situations seem hopeless to you?
- When have you felt like the fruitless fig: alive but not “fruitful”?
- How do we move from being people who focus only on what’s lacking to being people focused on possibility?

The Gardener saw possibility for the poor, unproductive tree! We, too, are given more time. The Great Gardener will work with us, loosening the ground that has hardened around us, and nurturing us with forgiveness, compassion, and empathy. We can trust that Divine persistence pays off. There will be fruit in the future.