

A GOOD YEAR FOR FIGS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 32; Luke 13:1-9

Modern life is punctuated by breathtaking catastrophe. Eight children and an adult die in an overnight fire in the Bronx. A hundred people are killed and wounded in a busy street of booksellers in Baghdad where Shiites and Sunnis have peacefully sold their books next door to one another for years.

We live with the bad news of misfortune happening to other people all around us, and hope that it will not strike too close to home which, of course, it may nonetheless.

In spite of the fact that we all live with the cloud of terrorism hovering over our city and the all too frequent discovery that someone we know has cancer or AIDS or is showing signs of Alzheimer's, we somehow expect that we will remain untouched. Somehow we imagine that it will always be us who will be sending the flowers to the wake and not the one receiving them.

We share that in common with the people of Jesus' time. Evidently there were two controversial events that had hit the news and attracted the attention of the folks in the synagogue. In Galilee there were some faithful people offering their sacrifice, observing the customary rituals, when in the midst of their religious observances Pilate's people came and murdered them. Like St. Thomas Beckett at Canterbury, or Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador struck down in the midst of celebrating the mass, it seemed a particularly contemptuous and poignant thing to do.

Inquiring religious minds wanted to know if these faithful Galileans whom Pilate had slain were *worse sinners* than all the others.

Similarly, it appears that there was a tower in the town of Siloam near Jerusalem that fell on eighteen innocent bystanders, a matter that commanded the headlines of the local newspapers for days. Tragic as all this was, when the dust settled, people began to ask themselves what was the meaning of this, and why these particular people were standing in just the wrong place when this substandard tower was appointed to collapse. "What about it, Jesus?" they asked, "Were these worse offenders than all the others in Jerusalem?"

We are meaning seeking people. And we do not like disconnected dots in our lives or in our understanding of what is happening to us and around us. We are hungry to make sense of the seemingly nonsensical things in life that don't add up.

The problem is that much of what happens is genuinely inexplicable. We don't have all the answers yet. We don't see the long line of history or time unfolding. Therefore we have only the short view. George Burns said at 100 years of age, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself."

But we can't see the larger picture. We see only in part, and through a glass dimly. We don't do very well with the void in our understanding. So we create meaning even when the meaning is not yet clear.

One of the things we do with our impatience is attribute to God the most idiotic of motives. I remember a funeral I attended once where an infant had died and the priest said that God needed this little child for the heavenly cherub choir more than her parents needed her. That's kindergarten theology, if that much, and utterly inadequate for faithful people to accept.

One of the best pieces of pastoral advice I ever received was to say nothing in those times when questions that have no answer are posed.

"Those Galileans, whose blood was mingled with their sacrifices, were they worse sinners than all the other Galileans?" they asked Jesus. "And those eighteen in Siloam on whom the tower fell, were they worse sinners than all the others?" they wondered out loud.

"No," Jesus said, "but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Now that's an interesting response, a call for repentance in the face of human tragedy. I suspect nobody but Jesus could get by with saying that at such an awkward moment. Even so, I find it a bit hard to take and somewhat out of character.

It's not the most comforting thing to say, after all. Somebody points out a tragedy, some terrible loss of life, an accident, and Jesus says, "No, these people weren't worse sinners, but if you're smart, you'll repent, because you never know when something like that might happen to you."

Rabbi Eliezer once declared that a person should repent on the day before death¹, a practical approach. But his disciples said that a person could die any day, therefore all of life should be a day of repentance.²

John the Baptist has already warned us in Luke's gospel that the ax is laid to the root³, and that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown onto the fire.

Jesus picks up the same theme after commenting on the tragedies in Galilee and Siloam, and says that if we can understand the parable of the fig tree we may understand everything a little better. A story is told to illustrate the point of his call for repentance, almost as if a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.

A man had a fig tree and planted it in his vineyard, and it bore no fruit. So he ordered it to be cut down. But this particular fig tree was tended by a kindly gardener who loved the plants, gently nurtured them in and out of season, talked to them as he watered them, checked on them for borers and mites, for mold and beetles. And he was not content to just give up on a tree that he had husbanded so carefully and lovingly.

"Let me work with it one more year," the gardener said to the vineyard owner. "I'll dig around it, and put on some manure, and if it bears fruit it will be a win-win situation. And if it doesn't, well, nobody can say we didn't try."

It's a *nice* parable, don't you think? It's pretty transparent, too, at an allegorical level. God is the vineyard owner. Christ the gardener. Guess who is the unfruitful fig tree?

And God is ready to give up on us. After all, the soil is good, there's been sun and rain, night and day, a tree is meant to produce, not just sit there and take up soil. You're supposed to bear some fruit, be productive.

God knows, God would have good reason to give up on the unproductive trees. We make war and plot insanity against one another. We spend our waking hours consumed with our own self-interest with little concern for others. We pass by Christ in the guise of a beggar pleading for food. We fill our bellies when others starve. We waste the earth and expend its resources rapaciously. Much of the human tree is barren.

But the gardener takes up the side of the tree and speaks for it when it cannot, pleading for mercy, begging for patience, asking for a reprieve. "Give me just a little more time. Let me work with this one some more and let's see if we can't bring it along. After all it's not easy being a fig tree," the gardener pleads. "Maybe I should have done something more. Maybe I didn't talk to it enough, or understand what it was like for this little one to be in this particular spot when all the other trees are so productive and this one is so reticent and shy. Maybe there wasn't enough fertilizer or air getting to the soil. Maybe not enough moisture. I don't know. Just let me work with this one a little bit longer. At least another year. And then let's see."

And the parable stops there, and we don't know whether the vineyard owner agrees, although we presume that he does. And we don't know if the fig tree bears fruit, although we might want to think that it does, given that much love and attention. All we know is the gardener is pleading on our behalf for just a little more time to see if we can make things work.

And therein lies a tale that brings the whole passage full circle. Because there is a faint sound in the background of this passage, that continues relentlessly, persistently present. And it is none other than the ticking of the clock.

Time is running out. Things are happening that ought to get our attention and be a warning to us, and we are ignoring them, acting as if we will live forever, but the passage reminds soberly us that we will not.

When the folks in Galilee asked Jesus about the catastrophes that had happened to others, there was implicit in their question an assumption of those other people's sin, but no awareness that their meter was running as well, which is why when Jesus brushed off their question he threw it back to them, saying, "No, they weren't worse sinners just because their clock ran out, but pay attention because if you don't get your act together, you too are going to die and somebody else is going to be asking questions about how prepared for death you were."

In the parable, the fig tree gets a reprieve; one more year is given to see if the tree will bear fruit. And the point is that *the meter is running*. Diamonds may be forever, but life is not. We get a measure of days. Some more, some fewer. But we get what we get, and none of us knows how long our life will be. The promise is that God will do God's part, which is to aerate the soil, and put on fertilizer, and add a measure of time but with no guarantees; and the rest is up to us. If we are going to bear fruit, it will have to be soon.

There are awful things that happen in life, accidents, terrorist attacks, fires and earthquakes, buildings that fall, cruel things like that tower in Siloam and that bloody massacre among the Galileans, or those folks in that commuter train in Madrid, vacationers swept away at New Years in a tsunami just a couple of years ago, friends and neighbors and family taken from us on 9/11. Life has uncertainty to it and terrible tragedies.

But Jesus' response to all that was, yes that happens, but don't let that permit you to make excuses for yourself, or stop you from dealing with what you must. Whatever it is that you need to be doing to get your life in order, to make amends with enemies, to set to rest old grievances, to find peace where there has been none, to stop smoking, or get a grip on that addiction, or fix the relationship, or find the better job, or stop drinking, today is the day. You're not going to have forever.

By the grace of God you may have one more year, maybe, and by God's grace the loving gardener has aerated the soil and laid down fertilizer and pleaded for a little more time on our behalf. But the time for excuses is over. There is more urgency to this than we realized. We don't have forever. And time is running out at both the personal and at the communal levels.

As a nation, we need to know that time is running out. We must find a way to make peace in Iraq and Afghanistan, and involve other partners in that effort, even those who are our enemies, lest they forever be enemies. We need to deal with the inconvenient truth of our fouling the creation and destroying the ozone layer, and denuding the world's forests, and our addiction to oil, and our disproportionate consumption of the world's resources.

It's time we got back into the world community as a responsible partner working for peace, and reducing the nuclear armaments that are now proliferating across the earth. It's time we helped both Palestinians and Israelis make a just and lasting peace in the Holy Land. And we must stop as a nation, using torture and tolerating its use on our behalf. Jesus was right, the justice you mete will be the justice you receive. And God have mercy on those of our people who are taken prisoner if what we have done to others is done to us.

These are not issues of political spectrum right or left. These are issues of Christian values, and they define what is a righteous nation and one that has fallen into unrighteousness. And time is running out.

At a personal level, in these Lenten days, there is no better time to deal with the excuses we have made for not attending to that in our own life which needs amending. If there are grudges we have nursed, it's time to put them to rest. If there is forgiveness that you are withholding, it's time to grant it. If there is brokenness in your relationships with others, it's time to mend it. If you are using the past as an excuse for not moving into the future, it's time to let it go. And why, because if Jesus is right (and isn't he right?) time is running out.

Let me put it this way. If you had one more year to live, how would you spend it? This is not the same question as what would you do if you won the lottery. Or if money were no object and you could do anything you wanted.

It's the question, "What would be worth spending your life on, all 365 days of it that are left?" Because some of us here only have that long to live. And some have fewer days than that. And yes, some, probably most, have more. But just suppose you only had one year to live. How would you spend it?

I'd like to think that I spent it getting things done that were worthwhile; that brought me peace and that put me back in relationship with those with whom I have broken relationships. I'd like to look at the sun every morning and the moon every night in this last year and believe that some things are constant and will go on long after I am here on earth.

I'd like the world, and this city, and my friends and all of you to be a little better off than when we first met, *because* we met.

I'd like to get to the gym more often and enjoy this body that God has given me a bit more than I do, because some day it's going to give out again, for the last time.

I'd like to enjoy every meal and sleep well at night over the next 365, and think that these little kids that are running up to the steps each Sunday and sitting here wide eyed and energetic, the way I was long ago when I was eight and nine and ten years old will inherit a world that is better somehow because I recycled and didn't own a car that guzzled gas, and I shared my faith with them and I taught them something about prayer, and about the love of God. And I'd like to think that I had preached a sermon now and then that helped somebody realize how very treasured and important and valuable they are in the eyes of the God who loves us more than we ever thought possible.

That kind of thing. That's what I'd like to do if I only had a little time left. Which of course, I do. More than some of you, less than others, an indeterminate number of days, exactly like your situation.

If you could only have one more year, do you think you could bear some fruit for the sake of the kingdom of God? Jesus said, he'd help. He said he'd aerate the soil, and fertilize, and try to get us as much of a whole year as he could. And during all that time there will likely be some discouragement, some towers that fall in Siloam, and some blood mingled with sacrifices in Galilee, and probably some people who mean harm to others afoot in the world. But there's no time for excuses any more. That's what we need to know. Time's a wasting and we have work to do in the world and in ourselves. Those of us who want to be called by the name of the man of Galilee, Christian, need to know that this is the deal. One more year.

And who knows, maybe this will be a good year for figs.

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¹ Pirke Aboth 2:10

² bT Shab. 153a

³ Lk 3:9