



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Third Sunday of Lent

March 24, 2019

“Intensive Care”

(Luke 13:9)

Rev. David K. Groth

"Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down" (Lk. 13 :9).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Now is the time to repent. That's the bottom line in this text. It's an important message - not just during Lent, but all year long, and it's a message for everyone. Everyone-not just those whose sin is great or acute; not just those whose suffering is great or acute. Now is the time for everyone to repent, because now is also the time for everyone to receive grace, mercy and peace through Jesus Christ.

Those who gathered around Jesus that day wanted to have an abstract, casual conversation about the nature of suffering. The heart of the matter is, "Do people suffer because they've committed secret and grievous sins?"

What triggered their curiosity were a couple of local tragedies that had recently taken place in Jerusalem. Pilate's soldiers had killed some Galileans who had come to Jerusalem to make sacrifices; that sort of news wasn't unusual. And a tower built against the Jerusalem wall near the pool of Siloam had collapsed killing eighteen people within. Was God using these events as a club with which to punish these people?

How about in your life: A pulled hamstring. Financial stress. Troubles at work. Troubles in the Marriage. Illness. Death. Is God punishing you with these things?

Sometimes bad things happen to us as a direct result of our own bad decisions. A man spends most of the afternoon in a pub. He's impaired and yet gets into the car to drive home. He pulls onto a busy road, runs a red light, and slams into another car injuring a young mom and her newborn baby. A bad thing happened to him because of his own bad decisions.

A young mom straps her newborn baby into the car seat, and heads for the grocery store. As she crosses a familiar intersection, a car runs through a red light, slamming into her.

Metal screeches, glass shatters. Both suffer multiple injuries. A bad thing happened to them, but it was not their fault; it was the fault of the drunken man.

How about the bad things happening in the news today? Did you try to connect the dots? Those homes and businesses that are flooded along Wisconsin rivers, is it their own fault - because of sin? Those Wisconsin dairy farmers who can no longer afford to farm and are having to sell? Is it some secret sin? Those who were shot in the mosques of New Zealand, did God permit this because they worshipped Allah rather than Jesus? Those who went down in the jet in Ethiopia, did God secretly gather together 157 secret sinners in order to punish them? Or the education scandal with the super rich pulling some illegal levers to get their mediocre kids into elite universities. Did you feel some Schadenfreude? Did your heart rejoice just a bit over their shame and pain? When you heard about all these bad things, how did your heart respond?

Just like those people 2,000 years ago, we often try to connect the dots. Maybe we don't say it out loud, but we suspect God must be punishing them for something.

Jesus has no patience for this. He asks them: Were those Galileans whom Pilate's soldiers killed worse sinners than all the other Galileans? "No!" Jesus says. They were not. "But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Those 18 who died in the tower of Siloam when it fell ... were they worse offenders than all the others in Jerusalem? "No!" "But unless you repent" Jesus says, "you will all likewise perish."

Notice, Luke doesn't water down the severity of the Law. The Law has teeth to it.

"But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Jesus means what he says. We must let those words stand, not just for his hearers 2,000 years ago, but for us today. When bad things happen, instead of sitting comfortably on the sidelines speculating about why they happened, we should be about the business of repentance. Don't focus on the cause, says Jesus. Focus on your response. And our

response should be one of repentance. In other words, we should not concern ourselves with the sins of victims, but of our own sins, and of how we may be delivered from them.

Usually we think the time to repent is when we've done something wrong. But here Jesus is saying don't just repent when you've messed up. Repent when any bad thing happens. You may be thinking to yourselves, "Well that's an awful lot of repentance!" Precisely. That's the point. Repentance is what Christians do. It's like breathing. It's part of our homeostasis. It's a way of life.

When bad things happen don't focus on the cause; focus on your response. Every tragedy (manmade or natural) is a divine call to repent. Why? Because repentance drives us to Christ and his forgiveness and salvation.

When Luther posted the ninety-five theses, the very first one says this: "When our Lord Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." So repentance is not a transaction with God for temporary relief of guilt. Repentance is a turning away from anything that is not right; and a turning toward the one who can make all things right. This is why Jesus immediately tells the story of the fig tree, a story about God's mercy and patience in light of his coming judgment.

A man had a fig tree planted ... not in some wild place, but in his vineyard.

Within a vineyard, the fig tree enjoys good soil in a fenced-in area, protected from grazing cattle. It receives very good care from the vinedressers. This tree has everything going for it, and yet it is failing to produce fruit. Such a tree deserves to be cut down, right? It's a dud. It's worse than useless because its branches and roots are taking up precious real estate. For years it hasn't been right, and the owner of the vineyard concedes defeat. "Cut it down" he says.

But the vinedresser intercedes; he's not ready to give up. "Give me another year" he says. He makes it sound like it's his own responsibility to make that tree produce. "Give me another year. Let me dig around it" (which takes out any competing vegetation and aerates the soil and makes it more

receptive to moisture and sunlight). "Let me work some manure into the soil." The vinedresser is going to give it a season of intensive care. He's going to do everything he can for that tree. "Then if it should bear fruit, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." He's optimistic, isn't he? This is no half-hearted effort. He's intent on doing everything he can to coax that tree into producing fruit. He even seems to have a sense of compassion ... for a tree! But he's also realistic, and has already accounted for the possible failure of the tree to bear fruit.

Notice, this is no permanent pass from accountability. The tree will face judgment. It's just receiving more time and care in advance of that judgment. Of the Lord's judgment, Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3 :9). But there is a limit to divine forbearance. "If it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." Nor are we left to guess what "fruit" God is looking for. Jesus told us in vv. 3 and 5: it is true repentance.

This parable is traditionally known as "The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree." Maybe that's a misnomer, because it's not so much about the tree's barrenness as it is about the vinedresser's intercession. This gardener ... he's not afraid to get his hands dirty, is he? Can you see him out there, on his knees, pulling out the grasses and weeds, digging up their shallow roots, loosening the hardened, sun-baked soil, working in a load of manure? Can you see the little rivulets of sweat washing the dust from his bare arms?

Of course, this sounds like Jesus who has a heart for the lost, compassion even for the wicked, for those who defy God and produce no good fruit. It sounds like Jesus who was not afraid to get his hands dirty and to have sweat and blood running down his arms and face and back and legs. It sounds like Jesus who does not easily give up. It sounds like Jesus who takes an inordinate, immoderate, unreasonable amount of responsibility for us. He suffers the punishment of our sin

as if it was his to suffer. He dies our death as if it was his death to die. It sounds like Jesus who shows love to those who have earned only contempt and disinterest. He shows love to the loveless, that they might lovely be.

Notice how the vinedresser puts himself between the owner and the tree. This is Jesus our intercessor. The Law: "Cut it down." The Gospel: "Sir, leave it alone this year also." The Law: "Why should it take up space?" The Gospel: "Let me work on it."

When it comes time for judgment, at least the Lord will know he's done everything he could. It makes me think of Isaiah 5, "What more could I have done for my vineyard? When I looked for good fruit, why did it yield only bad?"

No one can claim God didn't give us the investment we needed, or the intensive care and sacrifice we needed. No one can argue God wasn't patient or fair. No one can say he didn't give the tree (the person, the city, the nation) ... no one can say he didn't give the tree the time it needed to produce fruit.

We see in this parable how God's way is to restrain his wrath. Even in his anger, he puts boundaries on himself and looks for a reason to relent. Punishing evildoers is his alien work. He gets no pleasure from it. We also see in this parable how God will stretch grace to its breaking point, in order to save. He will stretch his promises, his forgiveness, his love, in order to save as many as he can. That is his natural work. That's in his wheelhouse. He is unreasonably loving and forgiving.

So in summary, when bad things happen don't focus on the cause. Focus on your response. When bad things happen (manmade or natural) that's the time to repent. Even when it's not your fault: repent. Then, look to Jesus our Vinedresser and Intercessor and our Savior. Look to him for forgiveness and salvation.

Jesus never says whether the fig tree of this parable ever bore fruit. I suppose that means the answer is left to us. Amen.

