

## “Looking for Fruit”

Luke 13:1-9

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March 23, 2025

Third Sunday in Lent

Last week I said I have very little firsthand experience with foxes, hens, or baby chickens, which were the metaphors Jesus used in last week’s Gospel passage. This week his metaphor is a fig tree – which I have even *less* experience with! Fig trees don’t grow easily here in Michigan – it’s just too cold.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Jesus has some other things to say *before* he starts talking about a fig tree. The whole passage has to do with the basic Christian themes of *sin* and *repentance*, which are especially important concepts during the season of Lent. The passage begins with Jesus discussing two situations, two tragedies. The first was caused by humans; the other occurred naturally.

Tragic situation #1: what Pontius Pilate did to some Galileans. Warning – this one gets a little gruesome. The people Jesus was ministering to tell him about “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” That line needs some unpacking. Which Galileans? Whose blood? What sacrifices? What, exactly, did Pilate do, and why did he do it? Well, to be honest, we don’t know a whole lot. There are no references to this event anywhere else, either in the New Testament or in other literature from that time. Here’s what we can piece together: Pontius Pilate, remember, was the Roman-appointed Governor of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea – the southern portions of the land of Palestine. Galilee was a different district, in the north; it was governed by Herod Antipas. So Pilate did not have jurisdiction over Galilee. Whatever happened, did not happen in Galilee. It seems that there were some people from Galilee who had traveled south. One likely possibility is that they had gone to Jerusalem, on a pilgrimage festival, as many Jews would do a few times a year. But something went wrong. They must have done *something* that offended Pilate. Maybe they were rabble-rousers; maybe they were trying to incite a rebellion against their Roman overlords, as a number of Jews did throughout that time period. Pilate had these Galileans arrested and executed. But he didn’t stop there. He did something with their *blood*. Both the Romans and the Jews practiced animal sacrifice, bringing animals to their temples, offering them to the gods or to God, and the priests at those temples would slaughter the animals and cook them for food. Those Galileans may have been going to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem with animals to be sacrificed to God. But Pilate “mingled their blood with their sacrifices.” It would seem that – after killing them – Pilate took some of their blood and *mixed it into* the carcasses of the animals that they had brought with them to be sacrificed, with the result that the meat from those sacrifices wasn’t just ordinary meat; it had been tainted with human blood. I know, *gross*, right? But this story is consistent with what we know from other sources: Pilate was a cruel and brutal man.

Tragic situation #2: the death of 18 people when the tower of Siloam fell. This one is much easier to understand. There was a neighborhood in Jerusalem called “Siloam;” the name is mentioned

three times in the Gospels. There was a basin of water there, called “the Pool of Siloam,” which was probably used for ritual purification. It’s also where Jesus healed a blind man, a story told in the ninth chapter of John’s Gospel. There was also a tower there, the “Tower of Siloam,” that was, in all likelihood, part of the large stone wall that surrounded the city of Jerusalem. It must have collapsed, and eighteen people died. This was a natural event; some people were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So why does Jesus talk about these two tragic situations? Because he wants to talk about the nature of sin, and the judgment of Almighty God. Sometimes people get this notion in their head that if something *really bad* happens to someone else, it must mean that person was *really bad* in the eyes of God, and that their suffering was God’s punishment. Jesus wants to dispel that notion. Referring to the first incident, the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with the sacrifices, Jesus asks, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” His answer: “No, I tell you.” They were *not* worse sinners in the eyes of God. Just because something *really bad* happened to them doesn’t mean they were *really bad* people. Similarly, he asks: “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem?” His answer, again: “No, I tell you.” Just because they were the victims of a tragic accident doesn’t mean that God was punishing them for some horrible sin.

We should consider the implications of this teaching. If someone dies a tragic death today, that does *not* mean that God is punishing them for some horrible sin. There are certainly instances in the Bible where God *did* mete out tremendous judgment because of people’s sins – like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities destroyed by God because of the sinfulness of the people who lived there – but just because stories like that are in the Bible *does not mean* that if there’s a tragic situation it *must* be because God was punishing those people. Usually, in the Bible, when people connect suffering with God’s judgment, they are looking back on their *own* sinfulness, not that of other people. So tragic events that happen to other people *should not* be interpreted as punishments from God. The people who die in those cases are not necessarily “worse sinners” than anyone else. One glaring example of this is when, back in the ‘80s, a number of Christian leaders asserted that the AIDS epidemic was *God’s punishment* on people who engaged in what they labeled as “sexual immorality.” That assertion stands in direct opposition to what Jesus is teaching here: just because something *truly tragic* happens to other people *does not mean* we have the right to say they were “worse sinners” than anybody else and that they were being “punished” by God. Assertions like that aren’t loving. They’re cruel. None of us have the right to say when God is judging other people for so-called “very bad” sins ... because *we* are sinners too.

So Jesus tells us what *not* to do: *not* to make assumptions or assertions about other people’s sinfulness when bad things happen to them. Jesus also tells us what *to* do. He is quite clear: “Unless you repent you will all perish as they did.” He repeats that two sentences later, almost word-for-word: “unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.” Do you see what Jesus is doing? He’s telling us that we should spend a lot less time dwelling on the presumed sinfulness of *other* people, and a lot *more* time considering our *own* sinfulness – *and doing something about it*. He’s pointing us in the direction of *repentance*. What do we need to do, today, right now, to be more faithful to God? To be more like the people Jesus truly wants us to be? He is reminding us that we should always be far more concerned about who *we* are in the eyes of God, than who we think *other* people are. If we spend more time and energy focusing on other people’s faults than considering our own, we are completely missing the point. That is not what Jesus taught us to do. It is not who Jesus told us to be. God calls *us* to repentance.

This is what leads Jesus to the metaphor of a fig tree. It's in the context of this discussion about human sinfulness, and about *our* need to continually attend to our *own* sins. He tells a story: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none." It takes a while for fig trees to bear fruit – roughly three to five years, depending on the variety of fig tree and the growing conditions, though many fig trees can start producing fruit before three years. If you're looking for fruit during those early years, realistically, you might not find any. Jesus continues: "So he said to the man working the vineyard, '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?'" This man sounds a bit impatient, but he's just trying to tend to his vineyard carefully, and if some tree is taking up precious space and resources and not bearing any fruit, well, better to chop it down and save that soil for some other tree that *will*. But the man's fieldhand urges caution: "He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.'" The fieldhand wants to give the fig tree one more year. He'll also give it extra fertilizer. *He doesn't want to chop down this fig tree too hastily.* It deserves another chance at life. He says to the owner: "If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down."

The parable ends there. Jesus says nothing more about that fig tree; the Gospel narrative moves on to another story, and we are left to wonder: how did that story end? What happened to the fig tree? Did it bear any fruit? Or did it get chopped down? What did the owner of the vineyard decide to do?

The story is left unfinished for a reason, because Jesus is, of course, not really talking about fig trees at all. He's talking about *us*. *We're* the fig tree. The owner of the vineyard is *God*. The fieldhand is *Jesus*. God wants to know: are these fig trees that I have planted – *these people that I have created* – bearing any fruit? That's what God *wants* to see, of course; our lives blossoming in ways that *give life* to other people, that *bless* the world with our goodness and our generosity. We're not just supposed to *sit here* and *do nothing*, taking up space, wasting precious resources. We're intended to *bear fruit* for the kingdom of *God*. That doesn't happen instantaneously, of course; we all need time to grow and mature and ripen. But there comes a point at which God starts looking at our lives, examining us: *what are they doing that is beneficial? What are they producing that is good? What fruit is flourishing on these trees?*

Thankfully, we get some assistance along the way. We have a fieldhand – Jesus – who is looking out for us, who has our best interests at heart, who sincerely *wants* us to bear fruit, who will do whatever is within his power to *help* us bear fruit. The fieldhand asks the vineyard owner for one more year, the same way Jesus intercedes for us before Almighty God. The fieldhand puts fertilizer all around the tree, the same way Jesus gives us nourishment in the form of his teachings, his Word. *Jesus genuinely wants us to bear fruit, and he takes concrete steps to help that happen.* He gives us what we need to *thrive*.

So it comes down to the tree. It's got a loving fieldhand who is giving it *all* the right conditions for growth. Will it, or will it not, bear fruit? Will *we*, in our *own* lives, bear fruit for the kingdom of God? Will we sit at the feet of Jesus? Will we *learn* from him? Will we *examine* our lives in light of his teachings? Will we consider the ways in which we engage in sin, both individually and collectively? Will we acknowledge the ways we have benefited or profited from human sin? Will we work to *repent*?

I hope so. I sincerely hope so. Because if we just sit here, taking up space, using up resources, doing *nothing* to bear fruit for the kingdom of God – well, I don't want to consider the consequences!

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