

Last week, we heard about Abraham having terrifying dreams. We listened to the psalm writer speak of fear. Even Paul relates a story of fear, humiliation and sadness. Jesus was being warned that Pilate was out to kill him, as they tried to invoke fear.

This week, we hear of people fearing that God will punish them by allowing Pilate to kill them or towers to fall on them. They are a people under the control of the Romans. They are not free to live or worship as they wish. Their lives are full of fear from outside events and people, and they internalize that and feel God must be punishing those who die.

It would be very easy for Jesus to play off this fear. He could win people over by causing them to fear. It would be so easy to tell them that yes, God is going to punish you if you sin. Just look at what happened in the temple and with the tower falling. If you don't clean up your act and repent and sin no more, God will cause you to die a painful death. He could convince them to hate the Romans.

But Jesus does not. Jesus never resorts to fear tactics. Jesus does not declare that those who died were worse sinners. In fact, he declares that they are no worse than the rest of us. He reminds us that we all need to repent.

Lent is a time for us to reflect. We reflect on ourselves, not only our actions, but our beliefs. Today, we are called to look at ourselves and see how we react to fear and stress. When people or situations are stressful, when life is not going the way we want or planned, when bad things happen, do we question God? Do we perhaps feel that we must have done something wrong to deserve what is happening? Or worse, do we look at others and think they must have done something sinful to deserve what is going on in their lives?

Now, some things are brought on by our sinfulness. If we drink too much, we will get a hangover. If we drive after we drink too much, we may crash the car or even kill or injure an innocent victim. If we fail to take proper precautions in any situation, we can suffer the consequences.

But it is not the fault of the innocent victim. It is not the fault of the driver or pedestrian hit by the drunk driver. It is not the fault of the child born because of rape.

But it is the fault of the drunk driver or the rapist. Of course, even then, there is always a story.

But God is never to blame. God never causes someone to drink too much and then drive. God never causes someone to rape. It is us who make these choices.

But God can help. If the alcoholic turns to God and asks for help, they may be led to Alcoholics Anonymous. Or they may be led to a treatment centre. Those are the actions of God.

Jesus relates this in the tale of the fig tree. The tree is not doing what it is called to do. It is failing to produce fruit. That is the job of the tree, and it is failing. It is not expected to produce apples because it is not an apple tree. It is not glorified for producing shade because that is not what God created it for. It was created to bear figs. So, the owner says, give up.

That may be a hard thing to hear. The owner represents God and God says, give up. Cut it down. Jesus is telling us that God does punish. If we fail to show any of the fruit of the Spirit, which for

us are "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Galatians 5:22-23, God will see fit to punish.

However, the story does not end there. The gardener, who can be seen as Jesus or clergy, pleads for one more year, a bit more time to tend and fertilize the tree. If it then still does not bear fruit, go ahead and cut it down.

"The parable helps place God's judgment and grace into a larger perspective. In the larger scheme of things, God's grace is greater than God's judgment. How could it be otherwise? Divine patience is simply another expression of God's love and grace. But God's grace is not to be understood as casual indulgence or indifference."<sup>1</sup>

Even when we are the worst sinner and it would be realistic for God to give up on us, God is graceful. God gives further opportunity for teaching and repentance. Each day, we are given the opportunity to nurture the fruit of the Spirit. Each day, we are called to reflect on our lives and see how well we are doing. If we are walking in the Way, it will be seen in our actions. We will exhibit love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We will seek forgiveness when we wander away and we will return to God's grace.

Each of us are given different gifts for furthering the kingdom of God, that is true. We hear about those is 1 Corinthians 12:

for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

No one will exhibit all of those gifts. But all of us **can** model the fruit of the Spirit through right living. This is the fruit that attracts others to Christianity. When a person exhibits these gifts, others want to know why and how. When we show unusual patience and are kind and good, when we have that inner joy, others will see and want some of it! God does not expect us to be perfect but we are to utilize our God given gift.

And when we see someone straying from God, we are called to tend the garden and help them return. We will not likely be able to help Putin see the error of his ways, but we can help those closer to home. If we nurture our own fruit first, we will then be able to nurture another.

So, when times go wrong and bad things happen, look at it through God's eyes. Did we do anything to cause it or were we just in the wrong place at the wrong time? God does not send disease, nor does God cause bad things to happen. God loves us and wants us to prosper and grow the best fruit possible. He gives us the tools. Sometimes we just have to do the work using those tools. Take a big breath. Fear not. Let's just get to work!

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Arland J. Hultgren [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1578](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1578)