“The Troubled Fig Tree”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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Luke 13:1-9.

Today’s scripture reading is a curious one. Jesus has spent the last few chapters in Luke telling his disciples that God is loving and cares for all. In Chapter 12, Jesus declares that there is no point in worrying about the future, for all that worry can’t change anything. Instead, just focus on today. He’s told his people that God cares for the birds, making sure they are always fed, won’t God take even better care of you? Jesus tries in many ways to communicate a message of God’s love for all. (Luke 12:22ff)

But then some newcomers show up with a story about a terrible thing that has happened down in Jerusalem. The hated Roman governor, Pilate, has killed some Galileans who were at the temple to make sacrifices. He has mingled their blood with the blood of the animals they sacrificed. We have no idea why Pilate did this – were they protesting something? Had there been some kind of disturbance? The text gives no indication. Nonetheless, Jesus senses that the way these messengers have brought this news, they are assuming that the victims of Pilate’s violence must have been guilty of something. They got what they deserved.

Then Jesus reminds everyone of another time some Galileans died in Jerusalem. It involves A tower, like a watchtower, on the wall around Jerusalem. It collapsed, killing 18 people. This was an accident, not a case of murder. So, were those people guilty, too? Did they deserve to die, Jesus asks?

The people who have raised this question are harbouring a common attitude about religion. That God kills people who are guilty. They die suddenly, at the hands of others, like Pilate, or through accidents and natural disasters. Leading a sinful life earns punishment and an early death. Only the bad die young.

But Jesus challenges them on this. He says, you think these victims were more guilty than anyone else? Not so, he says. The guilty, the sinful, can be found everywhere. So, you had better repent, or you, too, will perish. It sounds like Jesus has upped the ante. Not only did

those people die for their sins, but you will, too - so smarten up. This whole passage sounds like God does punish people for their sins. God sounds like a holy assassin.

This kind of thinking used to be very common. In Europe many centuries ago, it was believed that most major disasters were punishments sent by God. Plagues were seen as ways to punish sinful cities.

London Fire

In 1666, the British parliament ordered a day of fasting and repentance after the Great Fire of London burned down much of the city.

Flagellants

During the years of the Great Plague in the 1350s, men and women went from town to town whipping themselves to atone for the sins of the masses, in the hopes God would stop chastising people with the plague.

In 1755, on All Saints Day, a huge earthquake hit Lisbon, in Portugal. By modern standards, it was 8.5 on the Richter scale. It hit just as people were attending church. The shaking lasted for six full minutes, causing church bells to ring all over the before buildings and cathedrals started to collapse.

Lisbon earthquake

The epicenter was offshore, and sent 6 meter high waves to pound the city, which then caught fire. It was an astonishing disaster that shocked the world. The Church declared that this was God's way of punishing the people of Lisbon for their sins.

Voltaire

However, the French philosopher Voltaire thought this was a disgusting idea. Innocent children had died in the earthquake, how could they have deserved this? He asked. Voltaire wrote a poem about the earthquake, where he railed against the Church's suggestion that 60,000 people had died due to their sinful nature:

What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?
Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice
Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?
In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss.

Voltaire's revulsion was one of the sparks for the enlightenment. Voltaire led a whole generation of thinkers who denounced the church's idea that everything happens for a divine reason. He encouraged people to find other ways of explaining natural disasters like fires and plagues, and to leave God out of it.

Today, we are all children of Voltaire. When we hear about a tornado that has killed a dozen people, we do not assume that they were punished for their sins. We blame nature, not God or sinful people, When parts of Los Angeles were on fire, no one suggested that the people of Pasadena deserved to lose their homes. The Mayor did not call for a public day of repentance to stop the fires. Last month, when a year's worth of snow fell in a single weekend here in Toronto, Christian ministers did not ask us to repent. That would be absurd. It is only fringe voices who assume that personal sin brings about plane crashes and natural disasters. We may bear collective responsibility for climate change, but the idea that floods and fires are caused by the sins of individual homeowner is now absurd.

But where does that leave God? In today's scripture reading, the people assume that God causes bad things to happen to bad people. The people Pilate killed in the temple must have deserved it. The people who were killed by that falling temple must have been guilty of something. And then Jesus seems to pour more gas on the fire. He says, do you think those people were more guilty or sinful than anyone else? Not so, there are lots of people who are sinful. Your only chance is to repent now, or you will perish, too. That sounds like Jesus is saying that God will find a way to kill you, too, because of your sinful nature.

But then Jesus tells a parable to clarify what he means. A fig tree is growing in a vineyard, but it doesn't bear fruit for three years straight. The owner of the vineyard gets frustrated and wants to chop it down. But the groundskeeper asks for a chance to help the fig tree. He will give it fertilizer and make sure it is well watered. Give it another year to bear fruit, he says. If this doesn't work, then go ahead and chop it down.

If Jesus was saying that God is a hit man, then this tree wouldn't have been given a second chance. Jesus appears to be saying that the Godly way is not to punish people for their sins, but

to help them change their ways. The Godly way is to be sympathetic to a person who is not living up to their full potential as a loving thriving child of God. And note the symbol which is chosen to represent a person. It is a tree which bears fruit – figs that will bring delight and sustenance to others. A person who is flourishing is a gift to the world.

Let's double back to how this conversation started. Did you hear about what happened in Jerusalem? Pilate killed some people, in the temple of all places. I guess they had that death coming, God must have been mad at them for their sins.

Does that sound like the kind of thing that a loving person would say? No. These people who bring the news are hard hearted, and judgmental. They don't know anything about the people who were murdered by the Roman governor. They assume the dead had it coming. They are the fig tree that is withered, which is not bearing fruit. So, Jesus asks them to widen their perspective. Everybody has sins my friend, he says, it isn't just the people who get killed by Romans and falling towers. If sin is all it takes to be killed, then everyone will perish, and it will be God that does it. Jesus is just taking their faulty logic and extending it. If guilt is what gets people killed, then everyone is doomed.

But Jesus suggests there is a way out – not just of this fate, to die, but a way out of this faulty thinking. Repent. That word doesn't mean "feel sorry for what you've done." Repent means to turn around, to change the way you think and feel. So, what would it mean to change the way we think and feel about God? Well, this parable of the fig tree suggests the answer. On the one hand, there's the owner of the vineyard who just wants to cut down the useless tree – that's the view of God suggested by these people who comes with the news from Jerusalem. Then there's the gardener, who wants to save the tree. That's how Jesus sees himself, and God. God doesn't want people to be withered judgmental people who can't even shed a tear for those who are killed by the Romans. God wants people to wake up, turn around, come alive, bear fruit.

Jesus spent the whole previous chapter telling people that God loves them. God feeds the ravens, God wants you to thrive, there is nothing to worry about, God will provide for you. God wants us to drink in the life-giving water, be fed by the fertilizer, to soften our hearts and bear fruit. God wants us to walk into the room and say, of my goodness, did you hear about those people whose house burned down? What can we do to help? Did you hear about the homeless people who were kicked out of their encampment with no place to go? How can we push our system to make more housing? Did you hear about that woman down the street who broke her hip? Let's shovel her walk.

Jesus does not see God as an executioner, staying up late to find ways to kill sinners. People in power have often portrayed God that way, but Jesus doesn't. His parable sees God as a gardener, helping ailing trees bear fruit. We can choose not to grow, not to bear fruit, or we can accept the help. It is up to us. Should we refuse, clinging to our judgemental ways, then Jesus is saying we are already dead, we are not the people God created us to be. But Jesus doesn't want it that way. Jesus will keep trying to soften our hardened hearts. Jesus said these words about fertilizer and watering in a way that were not just true once, two thousand years ago, but in a way that we are still repeating today, this morning. Jesus will keep trying to save us, every day. The reward is a life that bears fruit – for us and for everyone around us. And that is indeed a blessing. Amen.