

Precarious and Precious

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At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, '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?' ⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Life is precarious. Nothing makes us more certain of that than tragedy. We cannot assume because our lives haven't been marked by tragedy, that we are better than others, or bearing fruit as God wills us to do. Repentance re-orient us to changed minds or being found, like the gardener does with the fig tree. There is urgency and God does all God can to work in us. God sees us as precious and offers another way to bear fruit for God's Kingdom.

God's grace is with us, this day. Amen.

Here comes some honesty. This is a challenging text to hear and a challenging text to preach on. We need some historical context to understand it. For this text is not as accessible as say, Jesus welcoming the little children. Yet even the parable about the fig tree leaves us wondering what Jesus meant.

This sermon could be called, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” – a title made famous by Rabbi Kushner’s book. It could be titled “When Good Things Happen to an Unsuspecting Fruit Tree.” (Rev. Dr. Matt Skinner <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9#>) It could simply be titled, “Repent!” I’ve titled the sermon Precarious and Precious.

Here’s why this sermon could be called, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Jesus has been teaching amongst the people. As He is standing around, some bring up the news about Pilate murdering a group of Galileans who have made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As they are worshipping in the temple, Pilate has them killed. Furthermore, eighteen people die when a tower falls on them. This was an accident, not anything planned.

But all of these were good people! Pilate was a murderous dictator and his victims died at the hands of state-sanctioned terrorism. He was known for this kind of behavior. People expected it from him. On the other hand, we believe the tower of Siloam’s fall was an accident. Just one of life’s flukes that a catastrophe happens and people were caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Bad things happening to good people.

Right now, you and I are witnessing the very same thing. State sanctioned terror onto innocent people’s lives. Good people were trying to go about their lives when bombs came. This is hard for us to understand, to process. We ask why?!

Jesus doesn’t give a direct answer for this death and destruction. What He does seem to say, is, “Repent. Turn your hearts towards God. Keep your soul intact, so it doesn’t die.”

Thus we realize life is precarious and nothing reminds us of that as quickly as a tragedy. Life is fragile. Some people die too early and others live a long time. When Jesus says, ‘Were these Galileans worse than all the other Galileans?’ He is asking the question, ‘Were these people any different than you? Just because your life hasn’t been touched by tragedy, don’t assume you are any better. Come closer to God.’

When tragedy comes, it can either propel us towards God or cause a full-stop in our relationship with God. Our response depends how we see the world and our place in it and God’s place in it. Life is fragile and precarious. When bad things happen to any person, we see that truth again and again.

This sermon could be titled, “When Good Things Happen to an Unsuspecting Fig Tree.” The owner of the vineyard says, “Cut it down!” The tree while having been cultivated and cared for, it simply hasn’t born any fruit for three years. It doesn’t know that its life is about to come to an end.

But hoe! This fig tree has a gardener on its side who saves it from destruction....at least for now. The tree doesn’t know it is underperforming. It simply hasn’t been bearing fruit.

Now, out of the blue, there is someone giving it more attention, more fertilizer, more caring love. For a full year the gardener will tend and water and give it everything possible so it reaches its full potential of bearing figs.

Do we know what happens to the tree? Does it eventually get the ax? We don’t ever find out.

What we do know is God gives all of us grace and opportunity after opportunity to go to bear fruit. God desires for us to bear fruit for God’s Kingdom. Each of us, like that fig tree, are precious in God’s sight. We are created to live lives of service and love for ourselves and our neighbors.

Jesus connects these two seemingly different stories with the word, “Repent.” This too, could be the sermon title. There is an urgency to Jesus’ voice which we don’t often hear. ‘Unless you repent...’ He says it twice. ‘Unless you repent!’

Repentance is something as Christians, we find ourselves doing regularly. At the time of confession and forgiveness, we repent of our sins, those known and unknown.

Now repentance might not be on a “Top 10” list of favorite things to do on a Friday night. But for we who follow God, it is a must. Repentance can sound like dusting off the old moral guidebook to take a second look, because it might be a good thing to do. Yet that’s not what it sounds like Jesus is doing here.

“Repent!” Jesus says it with firmness and resolve.

When the fig tree begins to bear fruit – if it does – it might have a sense of being found. “This is who I am. I was lost and now I’m found! Bearing fruit is what I’m supposed to be about.”

In this Lukan passage, repentance is just that. It is a new way of seeing. Coming to clarity about who or what we are in God's eyes. Here repentance is not a somber expression of regret. Rather, repentance brings an understanding of God's desires.

This precious fig tree is given ample time and attention to bear fruit. Will it?

Not When Bad things happen to Good People. Nor, When Good Things Happen Unsuspectingly to the Fig Tree. Repent....closer! Instead...

Life is precarious. Nothing makes us more certain of that than tragedy. We cannot assume because our lives haven't been marked by tragedy, that we are better than others, or bearing fruit as God wills us to do.

Repentance re-orientes us to changed minds or being found, like the gardener does with the fig tree. There is urgency and God does all God can to work God's work in us. God sees us as precious and offers another way to bear fruit for God's Kingdom.

Amen.