

The Garden of the Unfruitful Tree

Luke 13:1-9

Introduction

I want to begin today by telling you three stories, two of which are in today's Gospel. All three raise the same question and point us toward the same answer.

Story #1 is recorded in John 9:1-9. One day as He was returning from the Mount of Olives, Jesus walked by a blind man – someone the Scriptures describe as having been “blind from birth.”

As he passed by, he (Jesus) saw a man blind from birth. (John 9:1)

What a sad situation! In that culture, this blind man had no alternatives than sitting along the roadside, begging for everything that he needed. He was 100% dependent on the generosity of those who would pass by.

Story #2 is a part of today's Gospel. In it we read about a tragedy in recent Jewish history. Pontius Pilate had just been appointed as the Roman governor in Judea. That was not a highly desired assignment. The Jews were troublemakers. They resented Roman occupation and consistently made life miserable for every Roman they met – especially those who held any positions of authority.

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. (Luke 13:1)

Pilate wanted to do something amazing that would grant him favor with Caesar, hoping that his grand accomplishment would get him reassigned to a better position. And any position would be better than the one he had.

When he arrived, he quickly noticed that the water in and around Jerusalem was awful. So he conceived a plan to build a magnificent aqueduct that would bring fresh clean water from the mountains. That, he thought, would make the Jews love him and get him reassigned by Caesar.

The only problem was Pilate had no money for the project. It was a great idea, but he had no funding. He soon discovered that the bank account of the Jewish Temple was huge! They had more than enough money to build his aqueduct and manage their religious activities.

But the Jews were not interested in helping a Roman governor, so they refused to cooperate. What would any political tyrant do in such a case? He took the money anyway and funded his project.

Well, instead of generating love for him among the Jewish citizens, their hatred increased and they began to protest. Those protests angered Rome, cementing Pilate's life-time sentence in Judea. He had to get the situation back under control quickly.

So he had his soldiers dress up in the same kind of clothing worn by the protesters and mingle with the people. The soldiers hung out at the Temple where all the Jews would eventually come. And whenever the soldiers heard some worshipper protest, they pulled a dagger out from under the cloak and killed the protestor.

Story #3 is also recorded in today's text. We don't know much about the tower of Siloam, but some Bible scholars think it was a part of the aqueduct project. At any rate, something happened in the construction process and 18 workers were killed.

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them (Luke 13:4)

Behind all three stories is the Jewish belief that suffering is a punishment for sin. The disciples asked:

Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? (John 9:2)

And in our Gospel today Jesus challenged those who confronted Him by asking:

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ... Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? (Luke 13:2, 4)

After raising that question, Jesus tells another story ... this one about an unfruitful tree. I am calling it "The Garden of the Unfruitful Tree" to fit into our Lenten theme of Garden to Garden.

These weeks leading up to Easter we are on a journey from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of the Empty Tomb. And along the way we are learning about the devastating impact that sin has on our world and in our lives with the goal that you, with me, will long for that empty tomb on Easter Sunday.

As a part of this journey I have asked you to memorize our theme verse for this year, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

That verse is important because the story of redemption is the story of these two gardens – from Garden to Garden. Eden to the Empty Tomb. This memory verse illustrates that with the two men associated with those gardens: Adam and Jesus.

With His story about the unfruitful tree, Jesus moved the whole issue to a much more personal level. Jesus went on to show the logical conclusion of their argument:

if God does punish sinners in this way, then they themselves had better repent because all men are sinners!

The question is not, "Why did these people die?" but, "Why are you alive?" None of us is sinless, so we had all better get prepared.

It is easier to talk about other people's sin and suffering than it is to face our own sin and the possible consequences for it.

The season of Lent is meant to heighten our awareness that we need a Savior.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

And

The wages (consequences) of sin is death ... (Romans 6:23)

My sins put Jesus on the cross. It doesn't make any difference about anyone else's sin. Mine was more than enough for Jesus to die.

Jesus makes it clear that human tragedies are not always divine punishments and that it is wrong for us to "play God" and pass judgment.

- Job's friends made this mistake when they said that Job's afflictions were evidence that he was a sinner.
- If we take that approach to tragedy, then we will have a hard time explaining the sufferings of the Prophets and Apostles, and even of our Lord Himself.
- What do you do with the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount that says:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)

In short what Jesus says is "Stop worrying about other people's sins and start worrying about your own."

I tell you ... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:5)

And then to give them hope, He told them about a fig tree.

- See the Lenten theme here? Point out the consequences of Eden and then point you to the Garden of the Empty Tomb.

According to Leviticus 19:23–25, fruit from newly planted trees was not to be eaten for the first three years. The tree needed time to mature if it was to yield the best fruit.

- And the fourth year the crops belonged to the Lord.
- A farmer would not get any figs for himself until the fifth year.

- But in this story this man had now been waiting for seven years to get ANY fruit from this tree!
- No wonder he wanted to cut down the fruitless tree!

The people who heard Jesus tell this story knew exactly what Jesus was saying to them and to the entire nation of Israel. Instead of being a people who bore fruit for the kingdom of God, they were caught up their own sins and overly focused on passing judgement on the sins of others.

Do you remember why your parents taught you not to point at others? Because when I point a finger at you, I have three other fingers pointing back at me. Let me show you three lessons in those three fingers.

LESSON #1: GOD IS VERY PATIENT

God waited three years during our Lord's earthly ministry for the people of Israel to repent and respond to the message of Jesus. But in those three years the nation did not produce any fruit.

- So then God waited about more years before He allowed the Roman armies to destroy Jerusalem and the temple. During those 40 years the first Christians boldly proclaimed the Gospel message, but the nation still failed to respond.
- Finally, their tree was cut down.

God is equally patient with us. He offers to us time and time and more time. Think about those you know who do not walk in faith with Jesus. How many Easters has God given them?

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

LESSON #2: GOD EXTENDS GRACE AND MERCY

Ephesians 2:4-5 says:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4-5)

He has had every right to cut us down, but in His mercy, He has spared us. Yet we must not presume upon the kindness and long-suffering of the Lord, for the day of judgment will finally come.

This is what many people call "The Gospel of the Second Chance." If a fig tree doesn't bear fruit after three years, it probably never will. But God gave it another chance. And another chance. And another chance.

It is always that way. Peter and Mark and Paul and me can all bear witness to that truth. Some of you can too.

LESSON #3: THERE WILL BE A FINAL CHANCE

It is significant that the parable was left "open-ended." We have to supply the end of the story.

- Did the tree bear fruit?
- Did the special care accomplish anything?
- Was the tree spared or cut down?

We have no way to know the answers to these questions, but we can answer as far as our own lives are concerned! Again, the question is not "What happened to the fig tree?" but "What will happen to me?"

APPLICATION

God is seeking fruit. He will accept no substitutes, and the time to repent is NOW. The next time you hear about a tragedy that claims many lives, ask yourself, "Am I just taking up space, or am I bearing fruit to God's glory?"

Which Garden is my destination? Eden or the Empty Tomb?

Together let us walk toward Easter in the knowledge that Jesus died for us and that in Him we have life.

Amen.