

A political leader, intent on securing power, uses an act of terror to subordinate a region. A large public structure, poorly constructed, collapses and kills a mass of passersby. Luke uses First Century examples of tragedy in today's text, but we could insert examples from any time period in history, and have a similar effect.

Bad things, horrible things, tragedies beyond our comprehension occur every day. Our natural reaction is to ask, "What did the victims do to deserve such a fate?"

Victim should be our first clue. Something was either done to them, or befell them. In the first example, a random group of Jewish worshipers were executed by Pilate's minions. Random choices. Their randomness used to heighten the terror, fear, and cruelty associated with the violent act. In the second case, there was an accident. A tower fell. Its wreckage indiscriminate. A consequence of wrong time, wrong place.

The people ask, "What did they do? What was their sin?"

Jesus responds, "It's not about sin. It's about systems. And if you don't wake up to the destruction of systems, you're gonna perish, too."

Despots, dictators, tyrants, bad dudes, arise in every age. Pilate was just another shade of Pharaoh. They silence. They intimidate. But most of all, through fear and force, authoritarians create a culture that devalues human life, and ultimately devalues all of God's creation. Dissenters, be they worshipers, protestors, or just different because of social constructions, are no longer God's sacred creatures. They're just expendable. Their expendability creates a status quo, and eventually, a level of comfort. And life no longer centers around love of God and

neighbor and a shared sense of communal value. Instead, life becomes solely focused on avoiding expendability. And that ain't living, y'all.

Efficiency is also a driver of expendability. We need a tower, y'all, and we need it by the end of next year. And we have a strict budget. Skimp on wages if you have to. Skimp on materials if you must. Just get it done. There may be displacement. There may be pollution. There may be growing pains. But they are all small sacrifices in the name of progress. "Keep prioritizing property over people," Jesus says, "And see how long you'll live. Not long."

Jesus tells the crowds, be they in Luke's story, or sitting in our meetinghouse today, to repent. Turn your gaze upon God, and work, both individually and collectively for God's good purposes. Be relational. Live in this moment. Let empathy guide your actions. Be aware of the corrupt corporate practices that are corroding your ability to live as God intends you to live.

The lection closes with a parable. An absentee landlord wants some figgy pudding and he wants you to bring it right now! He's been waiting for three years. Each year he comes to survey the property and the young tree fails to bear fruit. The landlord is ready to start over. His patience has ended. In his opinion, the tree has not, nor will it ever achieve its purpose.

A farmer intervenes. "Give me one more season," he says. "I'll give it plenty of attention. If after a year, the tree has no fruit, you may cut it down. If it does bear fruit, all the better."

I don't know many farmers, any, actually, who demonstrate this kind of patience. At least not ones that need to pay their bills. A farmer must

have results from their crop, and three seasons of scarcity seems extreme. We can read lots of stories about Depression-era farmers, who though they knew their soil needed a year's rest to be successful, didn't have the luxury of patience and prudence.

I also don't know of too many landlords who wait around for another calendar year to earn a profit. Passive income is good. Passive farmland is not.

I think Jesus wants us to recognize that discrepancy in the story. I don't know if God is supposed to be the landowner, or the farmer, or the tree, or all three, or none of them. I honestly don't care. And I don't think you should either. I think the point is that you can't shoehorn God into the neatness and predictability of agricultural economics.

God doesn't operate with the efficiency of a commercial farmer. I think God is a lot more like a tinkering gardener. God seeks to nurture things. God gives creations ample opportunity to grow and thrive. And God isn't looking to harvest creation for profits. God is looking to harvest creation in order that creation might be a realized reflection of God's goodness.

The ancient writers, and I suppose a whole lot of modern thinkers, too, spoke/speak of a judgement day. I guess that is supposed to be the point in history where's God hourglass runs out, and God brings the world into finality whether we're ready or not. The Car Warranty people who keep phone-bombing you aren't going to give you anymore notices of extension beyond that day.

I think y'all know me well enough to know that I don't spend a whole lot of time contemplating a final judgement day, or the precise

coordinates for the kin-dom's arrival. My thinking is more existential. I believe our realizing of purpose is ever-becoming. There's a point where our thousands, even millions of moments of individual and collective kin-dom realizations manifest into purposeful living and keep moving along an ever-expanding spectrum. It's that chorus of love being Christ's presence I mention in my benediction each week.

I still do, however, believe that God has expectations for us, and a deep longing for us to meet those expectations. God's urgency isn't expressed as a countdown toward some cosmic ultimatum – e.g. – ten minutes until self-destruction. God is patient, and kind, and eager, and creative, and a whole lot more expansive and graceful than anyone of us. God's urgency, much like that of a parent, is to see humanity live into its purpose. Because every moment we choose to be something other than ourselves is a moment where we aren't really living. And if we string together too many of those lifeless moments, we become dead to living.

God isn't in the business of performing acts of retribution. God is living into the calling of bringing about restoration in the lives of God's people.

Even if Luke's end-times don't exactly square with our own understanding, there's still value in the author's expressions. Luke infers that God will exhaust every possible avenue before giving up on creation's ability to fulfil its purpose, much like a farmer who gives a tree a fourth season of chance. In other words, there is ample time to turn our lives into living lives.

Grace abounds, Sardis. In this season of Lent, perhaps it's time to reframe our urgency for the inbreaking of God's world. It's not about

Bring Me Some Figgy Pudding!
Bob Stillerman
Third Sunday of Lent, 3/6/2022
Luke 13:1-9



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

being eager to avoid God's wrath. It's about being eager to experience God's love and God's goodness. Jesus reminds us that such a chance is here and now. And who knows, maybe with a little care and attention, and fertilizer, too, the Sardis tree will bear figs in the coming season. May it be so, and may it be soon! And bring us some figgy pudding right now!!!! Amen.