

If It Bears Fruit

Scriptures: Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9

Finding Life

We're almost halfway through our Lenten journey. The slow-paced days of Jesus' ministry in Galilee are quickly shifting towards the long shadow cast by the cross ahead of us. In a nutshell, we'll be talking today about the Jesus who gathers us up inviting us to live a life of fruitfulness. As singer/songwriter Chris Tomlin so eloquently says, "O the wonderful cross, o the wonderful cross, bids me come and die and find that I may truly live." Jesus offers us an abundant, fruitful life – if we're willing to let Him take us and use us for His purposes. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 13:1-9. I'll be reading from the New International Version today. **Read Luke 13:1-9.**

Luke doesn't record where Jesus is when the events occur in our text this morning. The only thing we know is that He's on His way to Jerusalem. Luke begins by saying, "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices," (Luke 13:1). Luke doesn't tell us who was present, and who told Jesus about the other Galileans. He also doesn't record information to tell us who – or why – Pilate, the Roman governor, killed the Galileans while they were at the temple offering sacrifices.

Murder in the Temple

We don't even know how many Galileans were killed by Pilate in this fashion. None of the other gospel writers mention this event, and if there were historical accounts which identified what happened, they've been lost. Scholars have speculated that Pilate – despite our gospel accounts which make him out to be helpless at best, or wishy-washy at worst – is depicted elsewhere in the historical record as a pretty foul guy. Some believe he was exiled to this location in the Roman Empire, and he proceeded to take it out on the natives frequently. He was adamant about rubbing the "divine status" of the Emperor in the faces of the Jews, who said worshiping a human was blasphemy. That's true – God alone is worthy of worship and praise! And Jesus Christ, His Son, who was, and is, and is to come. He's God, with human skin on, and deserves our worship and praise.

To wrap up about Pilate, he frequently revoked the "special status" of the temple treasury, and would lay claim to the funds to use as he saw fit. He took enjoyment in spoiling religious festivals and feast days by making public decrees that prohibited or limited their celebration. There is speculation that Pilate heard rumors of an uprising in Jerusalem, so he sent undercover soldiers into the temple to find and kill the ring-leaders, which they proceeded to do, right in the temple courtyards, spilling human blood and letting it mingle with the animal sacrifices. This outrageous act destroyed

worship that day, and made the temple “unclean,” for approximately a week until the cleansing rituals could be performed by the priests.

Apparently these “present” folks wanted to make Jesus aware of the political upheaval and turmoil happening between Pilate and the Jewish people, in the hopes that He would take a side in the political debate. Maybe they were zealots who wanted Jesus to come out in favor publicly for their revolutionary agenda. Or maybe they were well-to-do collaborators with Rome from the political and religious establishment who were hoping He would say something that they could use to get Rome interested enough to take care of their “problem” – Jesus Himself. Or maybe they were just run-of-the-mill people – like you and me – appalled at what they see on the news, things like Russian bombs blowing up maternity wards and children’s shelters in Ukraine. Maybe they wanted Someone to answer that perennial question – “Why? Why do bad things happen to good people?”

Jesus Doesn’t React Like Us

Jesus doesn’t react in the way most of us would. He doesn’t get political. It’s noteworthy to point out that Jesus doesn’t come up with some reason as to why the event occurred. He answers, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish,” (verses 2 and 3). I’ve heard people say – you probably have, too – that the person “got what they deserved.” Some folks call that “karma.” Or it may be self-focused, along the lines of, “Well, God must hate me.” Those are not Biblical worldviews. We need look no further than Job, or even Jesus, to see that those are flawed mindsets.

Let’s talk for a minute about Job. Job was a righteous man. He worshiped God and was obedient, yet disaster strikes and Job loses his children, his flocks, his wealth, his reputation, and even his friendships because people assumed that he had sinned. Did Job deserve all this to happen to him? No. Sometimes bad things happen to good people.

Look also at the life of Jesus Christ. He never did anything wrong. He healed people, He cast out demons, and He taught people how to treat others and how to correctly worship God. And yet He was crucified. Did He deserve a death like that? No. He didn’t deserve it.

But, friends, we do. You and I deserve it for the junk we’ve done. Our sin, and our unfaithfulness to God put Jesus Christ on the cross. And for anyone here today, or listening out there on Facebook, whether that’s right now in real-time, or later, who may be thinking, “God must hate me.” Friend, He absolutely adores you! That’s why Jesus came down – to take the nails – to prove God’s love for us. Paul, in his letter to the

church at Rome says, “But God proves His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” (Rom. 5:8).

Collapse of the Tower

Luke records that Jesus goes on to further drive this point home to “those present.” Jesus says, “Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish,” (verses 4 and 5). Here again, is an event recorded in Luke’s gospel, which is found nowhere else. The tower of Siloam was located in Jerusalem, near a pool with the same name, where Jesus heals a man who had been blind, in John’s gospel (9:7).

We don’t know what happened with the tower. Maybe there were too many people at the top and it couldn’t bear their weight. Its foundation could have shifted, resulting in its collapse. Maybe it was just old and needed tore down but people just left it go. There’s a building in Sidney like that. They’ve got the sidewalk blocked off in front of it. When the Ohio Building comes down, it’s going to take out more than the sidewalk though.

Here again, Jesus says they didn’t deserve what happened to them. He goes on to paint a picture for His audience in that day – and for us today – of a world that’s very unsafe. It’s a world where terrible things happen to innocent people, through no fault of their own. So why does He call for the people listening to Him – and us – to repent, especially if the repenting doesn’t save us from dying?

Repentance and Salvation

Repentance and salvation aren’t about dying. Historically, people have had that a little messed up. Roman Emperor Constantine, whom history has given the epithet, “the Great,” waited until he was on his deathbed in 337, to repent, to be baptized, and to profess his faith in Jesus Christ. But the man called the Council of Nicaea together in 325, and paid the tab for the 1,800 bishops throughout the entire Roman Empire to travel and stay there to do the foundational work of determining the theology of the Church. He thought if he repented, was baptized, and then sinned afterwards, that he wouldn’t receive forgiveness for the new sins he committed. Sometimes people still get twisted ideas like that today.

Jesus tells a parable in the rest of our Scripture reading today, and I can relate. He says, “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any,” (Luke 13:6). I don’t have a fig tree. Kendra and I have apple and pear trees up at the house. We planted them probably twelve years ago. It took several years for them to actually produce fruit. “So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree

and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" (verse 7). That's a good question!

Two summers ago Kendra and I cut down one of our pear trees. It usually only produced two or three very large pears each summer. Its roots had gotten into the leach field and was messing up the drainage. "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down,'" (verses 8 and 9), the gardener replies. That works – as long as he doesn't get the roots into his leach field! All joking aside, he's giving the fig tree another chance to produce fruit, and live, rather than be chopped down and thrown into the fire. Jesus uses this parable to tell the people, and us today, that we need to repent – turn ourselves around – and follow Him so we won't get what we deserve.

Bearing Fruit

Several years ago I read a story about Thomas Edison's invention of the electric light-bulb. Light-bulbs are so common today, that if you drop one and break it, we don't worry about it, because we can easily go get another one. When Thomas Edison was first working on inventing the light-bulb, this wasn't the case. It took his team of workers twenty-four hours to put together just one light-bulb. When the team was finished with it, Edison gave it to a young boy to carry upstairs. Step by step the boy carefully climbed the stairs, afraid he would drop the priceless piece of work.

You know what happened next! The boy dropped the bulb as he got to the very top of the stairs! It took the team another twenty-four hours to create another one. Finally, tired and ready for a break, Edison was ready to have the bulb carried upstairs again. Who do you think he had carry it? He gave it to the same young boy who had dropped the first one. Thomas Edison gave that boy another opportunity – a second chance, to try it again. When we give someone another chance, that's extending grace to them. It's showing them that they are forgiven, just like Edison showed the boy he was forgiven for dropping the first light-bulb.

Repentance and salvation aren't about dying. They're about living – into the lives God originally intended us to live into at our births and at our baptism. They're about producing fruit – fruit that will last. Friends, you and I are the fig trees in Jesus' story today – and how we relate to Him is the fundamental question. How do we intend to live? Do we just want to take up space, and be wastes of dirt? Or do we want to produce fruit? If we're producing fruit, are we producing fruit that will last?

As His followers, He expects us to produce fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). There are times when He's sorely disappointed in what He sees going on down here, but He gives us another opportunity, another call to repent, another chance. When we let Him work in our lives, He helps us produce the kind of fruit God expects of us. Church,

aren't you glad that we have a God who loves, forgives, and pursues us relentlessly, who gives us new opportunities to bear fruit for His glory?

Prayer: Come near us, O God, we seek You and call on You. We need Your mercy and pardon. We come thirsty and wait on You, because You give the living water of life. Turn us from every sin, teach us true repentance, so that we may be neither barren or unfruitful, but believe in our hearts and confess with our lips Your salvation found in Christ alone. Amen.