

“Lenten Questions”
Isaiah 55:1-9 Luke 13:1-9
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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We might not have put it the same way . . . probably would not have asked about the sinfulness of the people who died. But if you and I had witnessed the slaughter of the Galileans, or seen the tower of Siloam fall and crush the people beneath it, might we not have asked Jesus for some kind of explanation? When something terrible happens, once we’re past the shock of it – or as we stumble around with the shock of it, really – it’s human nature to try to make sense of things. The first thing we often do is ask “Why?” Why did that earthquake strike Haiti – a place that had suffered enough . . . a people already struggling. Why *another* earthquake so soon . . . why tsunamis striking small villages . . . sweeping people into the sea? Why do Iraqi extremists choose to end their own lives, murdering voters just glad to have a say in their government? Why do the bombs kill some and not others? Why do children get cancer? *Why* . . . did the car crash, the dog bite, the stove catch fire? Why?

In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus seems abrupt in his response to the people raising questions like these. They gather around him, painfully aware that life is fragile, and longing for answers to restore their sense of balance and control. Did these bad things happen because the people were bad? That was the assumption of the day – that disease and suffering and death bore a direct correlation to human sinfulness: the greater the sin, the more likely the misfortune. And it isn’t just people like Pat Robertson who think that way today. “It isn’t fair,” we often say, when something awful happens to a person we consider good. Christ dismisses the assumption that bad things happen primarily to bad people. God doesn’t work that way, doesn’t punish people that way. But Jesus ignores the larger question of *why* tragedies happen, and he asks a searing question of his own. Essentially he says: “Do you think you are any better than the people who died? No,” Jesus tells them. “But unless you repent, you will perish as they did.”

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “There is no sense spending too much time trying to decipher this piece of the good news. As far as I can tell, it is not meant to aid reason but to disarm it. In an intervention aimed below his listeners’ heads, Jesus touches the panic they have inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them.”¹ He does so not because he’s cruel or insensitive, but because there is something Jesus wants the people to know; perhaps their fear has opened a place in them to hear it. *Repent, Jesus says. Turn to God. Death, with the judgment of God, can come at any moment. “It can happen when engaged in ritual. It can happen standing under a wall. And when it happens so suddenly, there is no time to repent.”*² *Don’t wait to turn to God; do it now.*

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Life Giving Fear,” in *Home by Another Way*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999, 69-72.

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, Collegeville, Minnesota, the Liturgical Press, 1991, 213.

That was John the Baptist's message as well. To the crowds that came out to him at the River Jordan to be baptized, John declared that God's judgment was at hand. The ax lay at the root, posed to strike, he said. Any tree that did not bear fruit would be cut down. Jesus uses the same image in the parable he tells next, though in his parable God is merciful – *surprisingly* merciful, given the poor performance of the tree. For three years the owner of the vineyard had checked that tree for fruit, finding none. Three years is enough, he finally said. "Cut it down; it's wasting the soil!" But the gardener says, "No, please. Leave it one more year. I'll dig around it, fertilize it; it may yet bear fruit. Consider one more year."

"Jesus invites us to consider the gift of another year of life as an act of God's mercy [– a time for] forgiveness, restoration, and second chances."³ It presents each of us with the question: if you had just one year to live, how would you spend it? How might you "make up for wrongs done and opportunities missed? How important that year might be! The lesson of the fig tree is a challenge to live each day as a gift from God. Live each day in such a way that you will have no fear of giving an account for how you have used God's gift."

In a sermon called, "Could This Be the Year for Figs?" Lutheran preacher Barbara Lundblad reflects on the parable. She says,

Jesus is the gardener, isn't he? He refused to give up on those who are living in the vineyard. Maybe the vineyard is the whole earth. Maybe it's the church. Maybe it's your life and mine. Jesus isn't giving up on any of us--you, me, the church, the whole earth. There's hope in this parable--don't cut the tree down. But there's also urgency--give me one more year.

Could this be the year? We can hear that as a threat. There's not much time left. Indeed, some evangelists press us with the question, "Where will you be if you die tonight?" But Jesus' parable moves in the direction of promise more than threat: "I'm going to do everything I can to help this tree live and bear fruit. I'm going to dig around it and put down manure. I'm going to find every way possible to get to hearts that are hard as packed down soil." While we're speculating about why certain people died at Pilate's hands or why the others were killed by the falling tower, Jesus, the gardener, is working on our hearts. Yes, those stories were real. They were as real as every tragedy we can name: [earthquake or flood or terrorist], cancer or heart attack or [accidents out on the interstate]. Such realities remind us that our time is finite. Stories like these dig at our hearts. They get to us with the truth that we can't keep putting everything off until tomorrow.

But being scared to death can rob us of all hope. Life can then seem utterly arbitrary--if I die, I die. There's nothing I can do about it, so why try? Into the midst of such despair, the gardener comes. Don't cut the tree down. Let it alone

³ This and the following quote are from R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995. 272.

for one more year. Jesus, the gardener, wants us to live. His passion is marked for us by great urgency--don't wait! Look at your life and dare to ask the hard questions: Am I stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Do I refuse to believe that I can be forgiven, carrying from year to year a growing burden of guilt? Am I so busy making a living that I've forgotten to make a life? Jesus digs at us with questions like these. Jesus digs at our hearts in the outstretched hand of every homeless beggar on the streets, of every child not fed, of every Haitian or Chilean displaced by an earthquake. "What have you done?" Jesus asks, and "What have you left undone?" Such questions, like the parable of the fig tree, move us toward repentance, a word that means to turn around, to believe things can be different, to trust that the one who calls us to turn around will be there even when we fail.⁴

God doesn't answer our questions about how and why tragedies happen. God calls us to ask ourselves another question entirely. That question – the *Lenten* question – is “How do we stand before God?” *How do you stand before God?*

God makes us a promise, as we survey the tragedies of our day: God will never let anything happen to us that is worse than what happened to God's very own son. In church on Sunday mornings we don't get protection from harm. We don't get easy answers to our hard and nagging questions about life as we know it. We get the presence of a god whose love and presence in our lives enables us to live in faith, without the answers. We get a god who is dedicated to digging around our hearts, reminding us our time is precious and limited, urging us to take stock of our lives today, inviting us to repentance and fruitful living. We get a “god who has given [God's] whole life to us, so that we might come . . . and learn how [to give our lives more fully to God].”⁵

Could this be the year we turn more fully to God? Christ the gardener wonders: Will this be the year for figs?⁶

⁴ Lundblad, Barbara K, “Could This Be the Year for Figs?” March 18, 2001, <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=185>

⁵ William Willimon, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” A sermon on Luke 13:1-5, Perkins Lectures at First United Methodist Church, Wichita Falls, TX, 1987. Found on audio tape at Union-PSCE.

⁶ This is similar to the ending of Barbara Lundblad's sermon.