



SAINT LUKE'S

“THE GIFT OF TIME”
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
YEAR C

EXODUS 3:1-15
PSALM 63:1-8
1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13
LUKE 13:1-9

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
MARCH 24, 2019

This gospel passage asks an age-old question. Why do bad things happen – especially to good people? Why did the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem collapse and kill 18 people? Why did some people suffer such gruesome treatment from Pilate? Is there something that they or their family did that caused this terrible thing to happen to them? If we knew what it was, we could prevent bad things from happening to good people. We hear the same question elsewhere in the gospels. Why was this man born blind? Who sinned, this man or his parents? (John 9:1ff) In John 9, Jesus explicitly says no-one sinned...but watch closely for God to be at work in this man's life. Jesus here in Luke doesn't explain. He simply recognizes that it is true. Bad things can and do happen to good people. Anyone can be the victim of violence and tragedy. Then Jesus pointedly refocuses the question. Jesus turns it around and asks: So what about you? None of us have unlimited time. Unless we live mindfully toward God and neighbor each one of us may be caught unprepared when our time is up. Jesus' focuses on time itself - not as a right, but as a gift.

We may think of time as a relentless competitive race that we try to win each day. There never seems to be enough time for our long to-do list. We say "time is money". Time is economically valuable. We "spend" time wisely. We may think of time as our enemy. Time robs us of loved ones, of youth and health. We

rack up losses over the years. Jesus himself uses two words for time: God's time (*Kairos*) and human time (*Chronos*), our hours and days. God's time and human time intersect because God loves us and is constantly interacting with human lives. Human time is contained and held gently within the even greater reality of God's time. Human time will be brought to fulfillment in God's timeless kingdom – that is where human time is going and what it is for. Time is not our enemy because no matter what we do we cannot derail God's love and God's action in history, especially God's action in Jesus. Our everyday time is the opportunity that God gives us to do the works of God's kingdom now, on earth.

As he often does, Jesus searches for a down-home image to get his point across. A fig tree. Fig trees in the Mediterranean climate produce figs 2 or even 3 times a year, so no fruit in 3 years is really unproductive. The fig tree is a waste of time and space. The owner has already been very patient. Cutting it down is reasonable. But the gardener – who knows the most about fig trees – is *unreasonably* hopeful. Let it alone. (Greek: *aphetes* – can also be translated “forgive it”). It doesn't matter why exactly there are no figs on the tree yet, just give it another chance and don't lose hope. There is today and God willing, tomorrow. Forgive it. Forgive our lost opportunities, our wasted days and years - this is what

God does. See what you can do now to make the most of the time.

This fig tree parable is often interpreted as Jesus' verdict on unproductive disciples: those who haven't "saved enough souls" for Jesus. Or perhaps you have heard it interpreted as a judgment on churches that do not do enough evangelism. But Jesus was not talking to a church. Jesus' framework is Jewish. Jesus is a Jewish teacher. In Judaism, the fruit of the kingdom of God is righteous deeds which are of God and which spread God's kingdom of love, mercy, peace and justice. Special attention must be paid in God's kingdom to those who are least powerful on their own - children, strangers, the poor, women, the elderly, and foreigners. The fruit has little to do with what we say we believe and is much more about doing good for others - friends, family and strangers, those in need and those who will come after us.

What the gardener thinks will make the fig tree more fruitful is... *koprion*. A word about *koprion*. "Manure" is a very polite translation. "Fertilizer" is an even politer translation - too polite to be accurate. *Koprion* is a crude word that is found only in Luke and only twice. We don't use the word in church services. The gardener says literally, "let me chuck some *koprion* on and see if that helps". He could have diagnosed the problem differently. Perhaps the fig tree needs more

water. Maybe that fig tree – which can grow to 20 feet tall – was planted too close to its neighbor. But no, the gardener with his expert eye thinks *koprion* is what's needed.

Most of our lives have some *koprion* in them from time to time. Everything from tragedy to disappointments. Broken relationships, situations that stink, sad things that we cannot fix or make beautiful and sweet-smelling. Messy, complicated, exhausting *koprion*. The gardener knows that nutrients can come from surprising places.² I wonder about this. I wonder if there is a spiritual truth here that is deeply relevant and encouraging - the messy stinky stuff in our lives can provoke and inspire surprising new life. To take a tragedy that I am sure is on our minds and hearts today: the horrific recent murders at the 2 mosques in Christchurch New Zealand cannot be undone. It is random and terrible evil visited on innocent victims. Yet the quick decision by the New Zealand government to ban semi-automatic weapons and assault rifles grasps an opportunity to do what we can *today*. Sometimes when something heart-breaking happens to someone we love, although we cannot change or fix it, that

¹ Echoes here of Jesus and the man born blind in John 9: look for God to work in surprising ways in this man's life.

terrible situation can develop in us greater understanding and compassion for the sufferings of others. Perhaps a tragic or desperate circumstance might inspire and motivate us to do something good that will last even after our time is over.

“Isn’t our life one attempt to fill a void after another?” These are Dan Barber’s words in the “Chef’s Table” series. Barber is chef and co-owner of Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurants – a highly successful chef. Barber’s mother tragically died when he was four. (*Koprion* indeed). Barber had to do a lot of his own cooking when he was young and came to love it. He reflects now that part of his drive may come from trying to fill that void - to somehow try to get his Mom back to the table. “Isn’t our life one attempt to fill a void then another?” I find this a poignant, almost heart-breaking assessment of the human condition. If that is how we feel about our lives, Jesus has news for us. Our life is one opportunity after another to build God’s vision of a new human community on earth.

AMEN

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