

Merciful Heavens, Figs! Luke 13:1-9



I have no green thumb.  
But when Tripp and I  
repainted our living room  
in one weekend a few weeks ago  
—we painted it all white—  
I bought some real, live house plants  
so that it wouldn't feel so sterile and cold.  
I'm trying like you know what,  
not to let those plants die.

Jane Gavin gave me a peace lily  
—those are apparently a low maintenance plant.  
And though one leaf has  
this whole dead spot on it,  
there's a new leaf sprouting!  
So it's death and resurrection  
all in one pot  
and I feel good about that.

I also took the plunge and bought  
a fiddle leaf fig tree  
—which, even on sale  
was an investment.

I'd like you all to pray that it lives.



Now that it is warming up,  
I've noticed that our camelia bushes are drooping

and it has brought to mind,  
that I have no idea  
if I am supposed to trim them or not.  
Anyone know?  
I may not have a green thumb,  
but I can tell that a drooping branch  
means it is too heavy,  
and probably needs pruning.

I can tell that a green leaf  
with a whole side that is dry and brown  
means it is dying and didn't get enough water.  
I can't read all the signs,  
but I can read the ones  
that seem obvious,  
logical even.

Can you tell when it is going to rain?  
You know those days  
where you can smell it in the air?  
Or how about on these spring mornings  
you can sometimes feel outside  
and can tell that it will warm up?

We say things like, spring is in the air—  
and though we might be pollen—  
we also mean  
we can read the signs of what is coming.  
Daffodils, Bradford pear trees, and hostas,  
all tell us spring will,  
eventually come again.

Those are signs that are hard to miss.  
As Jesus is talking with  
the crowds and his disciples,  
he says as much to them.  
Right before this passage he says,

“When you see a cloud rising in the west,  
you immediately say,

‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens.  
And when you see the south wind blowing, you say,  
‘There will be a scorching heat’;  
and it happens.” (TJANT)\*

We are good at seeing  
what seems predictable and logical.  
If someone smokes their whole life  
and hears the doctor uses the words,  
*lung cancer*, we are deeply saddened  
but aren’t terribly surprised.  
That seems logical.

But what about when the sweet 8 year old,  
has strange headaches  
and we hear the words *brain tumor*?

When the unthinkable,  
the unpredictable happens,  
why do we jump to certainty  
instead of silence?



Jesus, did you hear about the Galileans,  
did you hear about our neighbors?  
My cousins and aunt  
were among those murdered.  
They were on their way to Jerusalem  
to make a sacrifice and Pilate thought  
they were going to start a riot.  
What is to become of them before God,  
now that Pilate has disgracefully  
mixed their blood with their sacrifices?

Jesus, did you hear about  
the tower of Siloam that fell?

Why did those 18 people have to die;  
was it something that they did?  
Who sinned so that this son was born blind  
—his mother or his father?  
Who can we assign the blame?  
Can't we twist this quagmire  
into something more explainable and presentable?  
“Too often, we assume that sickness  
and its sibling death  
are but lines demarcating  
the cursed from the *#blessed*.”<sup>1</sup>  
Guilty.

Kate Bowler, who I have mentioned before,  
is a professor at Duke Divinity School  
who is living with stage IV colon cancer.  
She writes, “Most everyone I meet  
is dying to make me certain.  
They want me to know,  
without a doubt,  
that there is a hidden logic  
to this seeming chaos.”<sup>2</sup>

This is us, isn't?  
Scrambling to fill the void  
of what might seem like God's silence?

Remember Job's friends  
when they mistakenly said things like,  
“Think now,  
who that was innocent ever perished?  
Or where were the upright cut off?  
As I have seen,  
those who plow iniquity  
and sow trouble reap the same”? (Job 4:7-8)

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\*The Jewish Annotated New Testament

<sup>1</sup> Eric D. Barreto, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-24-lent-3c-luke-131-9>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

We know how wrong Job's friends were,  
but we fall into the same  
certainty trap again and again.

Even when we want to help,  
we are often guilty of theological malpractice<sup>3</sup>,  
saying things like, *it's going to be okay, I promise.*  
Bowler's response when that is said to her is,  
"Well, fairy godmother,  
that's going to be a tough row to hoe  
when things go badly."<sup>4</sup>

So when you see the south winds blowing  
and you say, 'there will be a scorching heat,'  
and it happens—you who know  
to interpret the appearance of earth and sky  
but why do you not know  
how to interpret the present time?

This is startling question from Jesus.  
What are we missing, Lord?

Do you think that the Galileans  
brought this on themselves because of their sin?  
How else can this be explained?

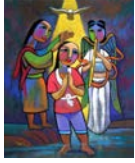
Do you think that those who died  
in the tower accident,  
somehow deserved it?

Jesus is answer is, No!  
He says, 'no' both times  
in the face of the crowd  
wanting divine reasons  
when there are none.

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for A Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (Random House, New York, NY 2018 pg.170)



Instead of offering explanations  
for God's role in tragedy and suffering,  
Jesus offers them the reminder *to repent*.  
He sounds so like his own cousin here, John the Baptist.

“John went into all the regions around the Jordan,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance  
for the forgiveness of sins...” (Luke 3:3)

Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand!  
Repent now,  
in other words and don't wait;  
turn from the sinful ways  
you are thinking and living now,  
Jesus urges,  
because you are not in control.

Eric Barreto writes,  
“[In this Lukean passage]  
Both empire and chance deal in death,  
thus it is misguided  
to look for some deeper meaning,  
some ordering principle in death's chaotic grip.  
Death is coming for us all.  
But Jesus says...  
death is not as powerful as we think.  
Yes, death is coming for us all,  
but it will not overcome us—if we repent.”<sup>5</sup>

Repent now,  
for you do not know if Pilate  
or any other leader  
will take matters into his own hands

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<sup>5</sup> Eric D. Barreto, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-24-lent-3c-luke-131-9>

on your next pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Repent now,  
for you have no way to know  
if the builders were lazy  
and didn't stabilizing the footings  
of the tower you climb.

Repent now,  
because you too might wake up  
to find that the unpredictable,  
the chaotic, the illogical,  
the unfair,  
has come to call on you.

I know you are thinking,  
'Heather this sermon is taking on a rather serious  
bumper sticker and billboard theme.  
Repent now, turn before you burn!'  
But the sense of urgency isn't misplaced.

Jesus is saying these things  
while he was on his way to Jerusalem.  
And as I said last week,  
he seems to expect  
that things will not go well  
and could mean his death.  
His message is urgent.  
Apocalyptic even  
—in its pulling back the veil  
on what the urgency  
to live truly repentant lives,  
not later, but now.

We cannot count on God's favoritism  
—Christ points out.  
If that were the case,  
bad things wouldn't happen  
to God's good people.

John the Baptist had the same message,

“Do not begin to say to yourselves,  
‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,  
for I tell you,  
God is able from these stones  
to raise up children to Abraham.

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;  
every tree therefore  
that does not bear good fruit  
is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Lk. 3:8-9)

When John preached this  
the people wanted to know,  
what then should we do?

We can read some of the signs, John;  
we can read some of the signs Jesus  
—but what should we do?

John’s message and Jesus’ message are one in the same...

“whoever has two coats  
must share with one who has none;  
and whoever has food must do likewise  
...don’t collect more taxes  
than the amount prescribed for you  
...don’t extort money  
from anyone by threats of false accusations  
and be satisfied with your wages.”

This is what John tells the crowds,  
the religious leaders,  
the tax collectors,  
the soldiers.

Jesus tells the rich man,  
sell all that you have and give it to the poor.

“In everything



do to others as you would have them  
do unto you.  
For this is the law and the prophets." (Mt. 7:12)  
Repent now and don't wait.



Maybe to drive the point home,  
Jesus says, *let me tell you a parable.*  
And so begins the unpredictable fig tree.  
There was a man,  
a landowner who had a vineyard  
and planted a fig tree there.  
Over three years he checks on the tree.  
But it is not bearing fruit.  
Angry, the landowner tells the gardener,  
"Cut it down!  
Why should it be wasting soil?"  
But the gardener pleads,  
let's give it one more year;  
another year to dig around its roots  
and fill it with manure and good soil  
so that it has a chance to bear fruit.

I want to caution us to remember  
not to jump and see God as the landowner  
and Jesus as the gardener.  
It is not biblical to have an angry, vengeful God  
and meek and mild Jesus.  
They are one in the same;  
a gracious and loving Lord.

Instead, see this parable  
as a story that would have familiar characters,  
a landowner, a gardener and a fig tree

and start there.

Now, we know the fig tree

cannot dig around its own roots.

The fig tree cannot put manure  
around its soil to make it rich.

And (as I mentioned at the beginning)

my botany knowledge is lacking;

so I don't know whether a fig tree

should even be planted in a vineyard!

But I would like us to ask

whether we are the gardener

or the landowner.

I would like us for a moment

to think of our own lives as the fig tree

—are they bearing fruit or are they taking up soil?<sup>6</sup>

Are we giving up coats or hoarding them?

(I personally have too many coats)

Are we fruitful?

Are we giving our money and time

where they will help build God's kingdom?

Are we just taking up soil?

Are we collecting way more

than we need or could ever use?



Friends, at times

we are both the landowner and gardener.

And when we are faced with the truth,

how will our tree look?

When the time comes to repent,

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<sup>6</sup> Rodney Clapp, Luke 13:1-9 Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year C, Volume 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2009) pg. 96

and that time is now  
—will our trees have taken up space in the soil  
or born fruit worthy of repentance?

The landowner sees only the logical  
and says it is not bearing fruit.

Cut. It. Down.

There must be a reason,  
and the reason is this is a failed plant,  
away it goes.

But the gardener says,

wait a year and let me tend to it.

Let me do the things necessary for it to flourish.

Is this repentance?

Digging around our roots  
tending the soil?

The gardener doesn't know if these things will help,  
but he's willing to sit and try.

This parable leaves us wanting,

because Jesus doesn't tell us

what becomes of the tree.

And perhaps that is because Christ is waiting

to see whether we will choose

to be a landowner and chop it down,

or a gardener and tend to it.

Will we only use the eyes of reason and logic

to assume God's will and character for our lives

or will we also use mercy and patience?

The logical and predictable thing is to say,  
cut it down.

Sin is the only answer  
to this suffering,  
this wasted plant.

The merciful thing to say is,

this might need pruning or more water;

let's cultivate this.

Let's repent and do things differently.

So the time is now.  
Lent is the perfect time  
to look at your life.

Repent.  
Let logic stay  
where the logical fits.  
And let mercy and growth  
be cultivated in your soil.

I don't know  
what would happen if over a year,  
we were more like gardeners  
who cultivate our lives  
to be like trees that were worthy  
of bearing repentance.



But if we did spend a year digging around our lives,  
tending to our soil  
and the soil around others,  
merciful heavens  
—in a year there may be figs!

In the name of Spirit who tends to our growth, Amen.