

“Figs at Last!”

Isaiah 55:1-9, 2 Peter 3:8-9, Luke 13:1-9

First Presbyterian Church, Hickory

#### Introduction to the Reading

This morning’s reading from the Hebrew scriptures  
speaks about a banquet... actually, it announces a banquet.

About 540 BCE, the prophet Isaiah stood up  
in a small community of exiled Jews in Upper Babylon  
and invited them to a feast.

Some forty years before,  
King Nebuchadnezzar’s army had destroyed their city...  
had reduced their Temple to rubble...  
and had deported them to this strange and foreign land.

Little doubt, after all these years,  
that they assumed God had completely forgotten them.  
Yet, there just may have been some of them still alive...

who, when they heard this,  
remembered the old days back in Jerusalem  
when these very words were used  
in the annual inaugural of the king.

One time each year, even the poor of the land  
were invited to a feast served by the king  
to eat and drink and celebrate.

What seems clear now is that the prophet  
was not only recalling the past  
but announcing the future.

God, he was saying,  
was about to do something new and unexpected  
and their job... their response to this news...  
was to seek the Lord... to return to the Lord...  
in other words, to repent...  
for God might yet have mercy on them.

#### Bible Reading

Isaiah 55:1-9

55Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.  
2Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.  
3Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.

4See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the peoples.

5See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you.

6Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;

7let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

8For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

9For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

### **Luke 13:1-9**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "

### Sermon

It's hard to let God be God.

We long to understand things that only God can know.

It is because we are human that we want to know...

it is because we are ONLY human,

there are some things we will never know

this side of eternity.

We want life to make sense.

And if we believe in God, we want God to make sense!

Whether bad things happen or good things,

we search for reasons... for "cause and effect"  
and sometimes we find it.  
A fella smokes three packs a day for 20 years...  
he has read the warning label a thousand times...  
and then one day the doctor says "lung cancer."  
And we grieve, because we love him.  
But what did he expect?  
Or someone builds a house right on the dunes at the beach...  
and when the hurricane comes, the place is destroyed.  
We say how sad it is... how beautiful the house was...  
but then again, they built it right there  
on the beach of a barrier island.  
What did they expect?

Sometimes in our search for cause and effect,  
we turn to God.  
Why do bad things happen to good people?  
Does God cause calamity like the cyclone  
that has just devastated Mozambique...  
the mass murder in the mosques in New Zealand?  
Is tragedy punishment for sin?  
There are billboards that say,  
"AIDS: God's answer to gays."  
And, of course, you remember Hurricane Katrina...  
in no time Christian leaders told us that Katrina  
was God's judgment on New Orleans  
because of the debauchery and sin there.

But what happens when the health nut –  
a guy who runs five miles a day  
and has never smoked or drank  
and eats nothing but fruit and nuts and berries –  
who coaches his kids' soccer teams  
and is an elder in his church –  
what happens when HE gets lung cancer?  
What happens when we commit our lives to something –  
to our marriage or our job –  
and still come home one day  
to an empty house and a note...  
or go to work one day  
only to be greeted by a Security Guard  
standing outside our office door while the boss says,  
"I need to see you in my office."  
What happens when a totally innocent, precious child

ends up at St. Jude Children's Hospital with cancer.  
It's hard to let God be God.  
We want to understand things that only God can know.<sup>1</sup>

Well, though we are separated by many centuries,  
apparently we're a lot like the crowds who were there  
in Luke's lesson for today.  
They, too, are people who want to establish cause and effect...  
they, too, want to put two and two together and get four.  
The headlines that day carried the news  
of two horrible tragedies.  
First, some of Pontius Pilate's henchmen  
had raided the Jerusalem Temple  
and massacred some Jews from Galilee  
as they offered sacrifices.  
In the other, eighteen innocent bystanders were killed  
when a tower along the Jerusalem wall  
suddenly gave way and fell on them.  
And the "two plus two equals four" folks -  
who've been taught that good things happen to good people  
and bad things happen to bad people -  
they're thinking that those who died  
MUST HAVE deserved it.  
Knowing this, Jesus asks:  
"Do you think that those who were butchered by Pontius Pilate  
were somehow worse sinners than all other Galileans?"  
Or those 18 who were killed when the tower fell  
were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?  
No! says Jesus. It's not that simple.  
There's more to the mind of God  
than putting two and two together and getting four.  
No, when it comes to interpreting the present time -  
when it comes to understanding God's ways -  
when it comes to finding signs  
of God's kingdom breaking in -  
you will need to look beyond  
the simple math of "cause and effect."  
Take, for example, a fig tree that hasn't borne fruit in three years.  
When the owner sees this, he says to the gardener,  
"Cut it down. Why should it be wasting the soil?"  
Which, of course, makes perfect sense  
in the world of cause and effect and two plus two equals four.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Montgomery in a sermon "The Voice of the Gardener," March 24, 2019, on Day1.org.

But he was not standing in that world.

He was standing instead in God's world –  
the God whose thoughts are not our thoughts  
and whose ways are not our ways!

So, the story does not end with the logical consequence –  
with the chopping down of the fruitless fig tree  
and the planting of a new one.

Instead, the story ends with the saints and angels  
and every other dear citizen in the Kingdom of God  
holding their breath in astonishment,  
as the gardener says words that echoes out into the universe:  
"Sir, let it alone for one more year."

Sir, this fig tree was made to bear fruit.

Give it one more year.

Let me work with it.

Give it one more year.

Jill Duffield is editor of the Presbyterian Outlook magazine.

This week in her blog post on this text  
she told about speaking in a church one evening  
after which a man wanted to tell her  
about a ministry called Community Renewal.

He even invited her to their weekly meeting the next morning,  
a Quaker-style gathering

where only those who felt moved to speak, spoke.

The large room was filled with a diverse group of people  
sitting in a circle of chairs around the perimeter of the space. They read one  
psalm and then one more.

Then people either spoke or they didn't.

Giving thanks.

Naming where they'd seen God at work.

Offering a scripture.

Asking for prayer.

At one point, someone recounted the joy

of seeing several community members

complete an education program and receive their GEDs.

Several of those named

had taken the tests repeatedly without passing,

Yet, they stuck with it and finally passed

after overcoming enormous barriers to their success.

And then she learned

that many of these adult students

who come through that program

had been labeled "unreachable."

What a pronouncement to make about anyone –  
Unreachable.  
Beyond hope.  
No need to try any harder or any more.  
Impossible to get through to.  
Unreachable.

How often have WE labeled people unreachable  
and given up on them?

How often have we labeled relationships as beyond hope  
and stopped trying?

How often have we lost patience with ourselves  
and just quit?

“Look,” we say, “no figs, no fruit, useless.”

But then we hear the voice of the gardener saying,  
“Give it one more year.

Let me work with it a little longer.

Give this one another year.”<sup>2</sup>

Do you want a sign of God at work in the world? Jesus asks.  
That’s it!

That is the sign of the times,  
the clue to the breaking in of God's reign...

Not wars or rumors of wars,  
but the gracious and patient hand  
that reaches down to halt the ax,  
the merciful gesture woven into the fabric of life  
that stays all that would give up  
on the barren and the broken,  
the merciful voice that says,  
'Let's give this hopeless case one more year.'

Patience, Richard Rohr reminds us,  
is the very shape of love.

Patience is the very shape of love.

Of course, this is not to deny  
the real urgency in Jesus’ words...

as if we have all the time in the world.

No, when Jesus spoke of the Galileans that Pilate murdered  
and of the folks crushed under the falling tower,  
he twice dodged the question, by saying:

“But you’ll die just the same unless you repent.”

Twice he said it:

---

<sup>2</sup> Jill Duffield in “Looking Into the Lectionary,” Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019, pres-outlook.org.

“But you’ll die just the same unless you repent.”<sup>3</sup>  
It’s not meant to be a threat that if we don’t act now  
something terrible will happen to us.  
It’s just the truth – the way things are –  
that **WHENEVER** or **HOWEVER** we die,  
we could have missed our true purpose for living.  
Whether we get run over by a bus  
or die peacefully in our beds in a Presbyterian retirement home...  
if we do not repent and bear the fruit of Christ’s Spirit in us...  
well, judgment has already come...  
we have been dying all this time...  
and the opportune moment has passed us by...  
time has been wasted... our life squandered.

For too long, when we have heard the call to repentance,  
we’ve pictured some sweaty street evangelist  
with a bony finger pointed right at us  
screaming, “Turn or burn!”

The intent is literally to scare the hell out of us.  
But the truth of the matter, my friends,  
is that repentance is all about hope.  
It means that with this gardener, no one is unreachable...  
no relationship is beyond hope...  
no struggle is impossible to get through.

The voice of this gardener pleads for time  
and miracle of miracles, time is granted.  
What’s more this gardener will at least meet us half way...  
digging around our lives...  
and feeding us nutrients...  
and giving us more time.

So there is always hope –  
not because the tree itself has the power to change –  
but because there is one who cares enough,  
is patient enough,  
gives enough,  
to enable **FIGS AT LAST**.

Well, I have no way of knowing what sort of goodness  
God may have long ago planted in your heart...  
what special purpose  
God may have given you to fulfill.

---

<sup>3</sup> Barbara K. Lundblad in her sermon, “Could This Be the Year for Figs?”, preached March 18, 2001. See <http://day1.org/638>

And I don't know how God may want to grow you  
so that you bear the fruit you are created you to bear.  
But I'll bet my life that there is something within you  
that is waiting to bloom this very morning...  
There is something in you  
that is waiting to blossom RIGHT NOW!...  
and the good news is there is still time.<sup>4</sup>  
There is no such thing as a hopeless case...  
no one is unreachable.  
Even our old, barren lives can yet bear fruit.  
Yes, the hand reaches back  
and the hard, sharp wedge of the ax  
slices through the air toward the trunk of the tree.  
But wait!  
Another hand is reaching out to halt the ax.  
It is the hand of mercy...  
the hand of patience...  
the hand of love.,  
and then a voice:  
"Let's give this one another year."  
Hope stirs deep down at the heart of things.  
The sap begins to circulate.  
And there may yet be figs... even now.

---

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Adams in her sermon "On Cutting the Fig Tree," preached March 18, 2001 to Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA.