

“Short-timer” GPPC 3-24-19
Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9

[A couple of comments prior to the scripture reading. Of the four gospels, Luke is the only one that records the story of Jesus and the reference to the Galilean worshipers and the people killed when the tower of Siloam fell (Luke 13:1-5). Verses 13:6-9 are paralleled in Matthew and Mark, but the fate of the fig tree is different in Luke.]

I was talking on the phone with my younger son, Thomas, the other day. As some of you know, he and his family live in Minot, North Dakota where Thomas is a sergeant in the U.S. Air Force. He’s been serving the country for about five years, and with accumulated leave, he should be able to finish his enlistment in less than a year.

When I was in the U.S. Army for just three years, we’d say people who had less than a year left were “short-timers,” as opposed to “lifers” who were career military. Somebody would say, “I’m getting short.” And we’d ask, “How much time ya got left?” And the person might answer, “Nine months.” We’d say, “It’s too soon to start counting.” And the person would answer, “You’re just jealous.” And we’d say, “You’re

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right.” If the person only had a few weeks or, (praise the Lord!) just a few days, she might say, “I’m getting so short you can’t even see me.”

It was okay to be a short-timer, because it meant the time of service was almost over. Time was indeed short, and certainly friends would be missed. But something new beckoned. And things were going to change forever.

Jesus said as much to the people in the first century who came and told him some news.

It’s as though these people had been scanning the Internet, or reading the newspaper. So they came to Jesus with the latest headlines of death and disaster. First, was disaster caused by human evil. People (Galileans) had been worshiping God, apparently making animal sacrifices to God. And Pilate, a political leader, had these folks murdered right in the middle of worship, just as, in our day, we’ve seen Muslims, Jews, and Christians murdered as they worshiped God--horrific and blasphemous.

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But maybe Jesus sensed something in the way these “reporters” shared the news with him. Was there a glint in their eyes? Did he sense a bit of judgment on their part? We don’t know. We can only speculate.

But he said, “Do you think these Galileans who were murdered were worse sinners than other Galileans? No, I’m telling you, but unless *you* repent, unless you change your mind and change your ways, you’ll all die just as they did.”

What a troubling answer from our gentle Lord Jesus. And he was not content to stop there. He continued, this time talking about disaster that seemed more random, and had nothing to do with human malice. “Or how about those eighteen people killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were worse offenders than everybody else in Jerusalem? No, I’m telling you, but unless *you* repent, unless you change your mind and change your ways, you’ll all die just as they did.”

This whole exchange is unsettling, isn’t it? Maybe, like me, you want to ask Jesus some questions. “Lord, you say that none of these people who died were worse sinners than other people. Then you turn and say, ‘But if you don’t repent, you’re going to die too.’ What do you

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mean? Aren't we all going to die one day? We hope we die when we have lived a long and happy life. So what do you mean, 'If you don't repent, you're going to die too.'?" Do you have questions like mine for Jesus?

Notice Jesus does not tackle questions about *why* there is evil, and *why* there is suffering and death. He doesn't address those questions at all. The Bible does not completely answer those questions either. We actually know that the Bible is like a chorus singing, sometimes in harmony and sometimes with dissonant voices. Some voices in the Bible claim that if bad things happen to you, it was because you have been especially sinful.

Live as a mafia don. Don't be surprised if your life ends in a hail of bullets before you meet your maker.

Make yourself the malignant, narcissistic center of the universe. Be prepared to have few real friends or even family members who truly love you. And be prepared for how you'll be remembered.

Bully your way through life, taking advantage of the weak, being greedy, doing nothing that's not calculated purely for your own personal

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gain, worshiping yourself. Expect to have an outwardly impressive life, but inwardly an empty one.

Sometimes sin has its own natural consequences. And biblical voices sing plenty of warning about that.

But other voices, such as the Book of Job, and the voice of Jesus, say, “Wait a minute. Suffering and death are not always the result of people being sinful. In fact, sometimes people actually suffer and die *because* they are being especially faithful, like the martyrs of the church, like Martin Luther King, Jr. Other times folks suffer and die and it simply appears to be random—like the tornado that lands on one house and skips the next one, the car accident that kills one person and not the other.

Jesus says, “Do you think these people who died were worse sinners than folks who did not die? No, I tell you, but unless *you* repent you’re going to die too.”

But that last part of his statement “If you don’t repent you’re going to die too,” does not make sense to me. And I consulted about a dozen

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biblical scholars to try to understand, and I wasn't convinced by their arguments either.

So, I may be wrong, but here's what I believe Jesus is doing. I think Jesus is speaking metaphorically here. He knows that life is sometimes unfair. People are the victims of crime, even hate crimes while they're worshipping God. And he knows people are the victims of apparently random events too. Either way, one way or the other, we're not going to live on this earth forever. We're all going to die whether we're especially sinful or especially saintly. We're all going to die *even* if we repent.

So the real question he raises is: Do we really live while we live?

Do we really live while we live?

That's why Jesus immediately tells the parable about the fig tree. A man plants a fig tree, comes back, and finds that it has not borne any fruit. Zip. Zero. Nada. You can't make Fig Newtons, if you don't have any figs.

So the man tells his gardener, "I've been checking on this fig tree for three years, and it hasn't borne any fruit. So I want you to cut it

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down. It's just wasting soil." But the gardener says, "Sir, give it one more year. I'll dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit next year, great. If not, you can cut it down."

The fig tree is given more time and fertilizer to be fruitful, but it's not given unlimited time. You see, it's a short-timer. And so are you and I.

We're not going to live on this earth forever. We don't know how long we'll be here. Life is a gift, an unpredictable gift. So do we really live while we live? Do we really want to bear fruit for God?

Pastor Emily Heath says, "One of the lessons I try to teach the young people I know is this: never give the best of yourself to someone or something that can never love you back...[And] I often want to ask [adults] I know, people who feel overwhelmed by the demands of life, why they keep living like this. Why do you make the choices that leave you overextended and exhausted? Do you want to live a life utterly devoid of abundant new fruit? Why do you give the best of yourself to the things that can never love you back?" (*The Christian Century*, February 9, 2016)

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Like the fig tree, you and I are meant to do more than just take up space. We're meant to produce fruit for God with our lives. This will mean different things to different people, ages, gifts, and circumstances in our lives.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of running the 3-2-1-Dash for Down Syndrome that was directed by one of our members. Hundreds of people gathered to make a difference for folks with Down Syndrome and their families. It was beautiful.

One of our families does something similar for autism. Another church member spearheads a hunger relief program "A Simple Gesture." Some of you are focused especially on racial justice, others on LGBTQ justice and welcome, others on environmental concerns, relations with other faiths, immigration reform, an alternative gifts market, 10,000 Villages, mission work, Guilford Park Guys for disadvantaged boys, and maybe one day, a Guilford Park Girls program. The list goes on.

Some of you are using your musical gifts to sing and play in worship. You serve on church committees. Some of you are really good at helping us with talking to the insurance company or boiler repair folks

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or you share legal advice or medical advice or financial advice. Some of you are here in worship and Sunday school on a regular basis. You're teaching classes. If you have children, you're getting them here regularly and joining them.

But some of us are overextended and not keeping God at the center of our lives. Some are hardly ever here, because they're spending time on other things that "cannot love them back," things that are actually not as important as God who *is* most important. Some have forgotten their baptismal vows and their confirmation vows to put Christ first in our lives. According to Jesus, improvement is needed. And it's needed now. We're all short-timers, you know.

But the good news is that we're given a second chance to use our lives wisely, to do something productive for God, to put God first, not last in our lives.

And we can all improve, can't we? That's what Lent is all about. That's what repentance and second chances are all about too.

Take a good look in the mirror this week. Yes, God loves us unconditionally, but God still judges how we use or fail to use our lives

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for God's glory, how we keep or fail to keep our baptismal promises.

Time is short. So what change is God calling you and me to make? What

will you do to be more fruitful, you short-timer you? Through Christ our

Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal