

Luke 13:1-9

13:1 At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

13:2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

13:3 No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did.

13:4 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 other people living in Jerusalem?

13:5 No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did."

13:6 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.

13:7 So he said to the man working the vineyard, '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?'

13:8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

13:9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Sermon:

I am TIRED!!! Actually, I mean to say, I have been tired. I'm not sure for how long, but at least since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. And I don't mean that I'm physically exhausted. Though to be fair, I've certainly experienced periods of exhaustion in the last five years – parenting, work, relationships, job changes and moves, the busyness of life will do that. Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually.

No, it's a different tired I'm describing. I'm exhausted, fed up, overwhelmed, fatigued, flat-out done with negativity.

There's this false perception that humanity is flawed, evil, underwhelming. And there's an even falser perception and presumption that God is vindictive, impatient, and ready to toss thunderbolts at us.

Here's an example of what I mean:

You may remember that about 15-20 years ago, you could ride up and down I-85 and see black and white billboards quoting God. They were audacious quotes, and not in a good way. It's really good to know that Fairway and Lamar and other billboard vendors are the direct channel to God's divine word!!!

The worst of these billboards said, "Don't make me come down there! This punishing God is as out of touch with reality as the Jesus who "gets us," you know the one who spends \$10 million on Super Bowl ads rather than providing for the needs of his neighbors; the one who only wants to remind us of our brokenness; the one who chooses to hyperfocus on the end-of-days rather than the living of these days.

And I want to know: Where does this nonsense come from? Why must it be amplified? And better yet, why must it be perpetuated? Because this theology is in no way authentic to the God revealed in the whole of scriptures, of the God revealed in Jesus, and of the Holy Spirit that has transcended and continues to transcend the lives of everyone in this room.

Negativity is a curse. And it's a cancer on theology, and ultimately on wellbeing, and on our ability to live healthy and abundant lives.

I'm tired this morning. So I'm gonna stand on my soap box. I need you to hear something.

I don't believe that God is keeping score. I don't believe that every immigrant, impoverished child, federal employee, diverse hire, teacher, scientist, person of a differing view is gaming the system. I don't wake up everyday looking to analyze how I've been fleeced. I don't spend my days composing a ledger of my morality. I don't lose sleep at night waiting for a Boogie Man God to come and get me. And I don't believe that every authority figure in my life wakes up each morning plotting my individual demise.

I believe in a good God who has made a good world. My belief that the long arc of the moral universe ultimately bends back toward justice is NOT rooted in naivety; it's rooted in expectant hope. This is not to say our good world is absent of evil, absent of unfairness, absent of tragedy. It's to say that evil, injustice, and tragedy will never be the final world. Ultimately, God's goodness, humanity's goodness, creation's goodness will ring true, and we will be healed; we will be reconciled. The world we live in is not a doomed experiment, it is an incubator for every good and decent possibility we can imagine.

All of this is a long way of saying today's text is brutal, especially if we succumb to lazy, outdated, unhelpful theology. So first off, stay positive.

Here we are in 2025. And this is what I believe about eschatology – the ultimate trajectory of the world. I believe in God's inbreaking realm – that is to say, I believe God's goodness is more like a slow trickle. Every human being realizes moments of their fullest potential – kindness, connectedness, grace, love, faithfulness – until finally, the collection of all these impactful moments, the goodness of all this presence, transitions into an experienced reality. God's Kin-dom, as Rauschenbusch reminds us, is always, but coming. God's Kin-dom is not something we wait for, it's something we work for. Thy Kin-dom come! Thy will be done!

The Jesus-followers of Luke's era live in uncertain and volatile times: the earliest Christians are marginalized and persecuted by Rome, and to them, it feels like the end of days. We describe this feeling as apocalyptic. God is going to set right what's wrong; God is gonna make God's world God's world again. The way to do this is to start over. For Luke's community, the setting right is gonna happen all at once, almost like a lightning strike. Therefore, they live with a sense of urgency. And I think a sense of fear, too.

I believe the urgency experienced by Luke's community lends to an unnecessary reading in the present. There's a harshness, and frankly, this harshness is unhelpful. If we're not careful, Jesus comes across as cold, overly pious, and super-apocalyptic.

So again, as we work our way through a difficult text, I implore you to read it with a positive view of God and creation, and with an inbreaking view of God's world. That's how we make hard news good news.

I mentioned that Luke's was a volatile world. A brutal world. It's hard to imagine anything less brutal than those colonized and captured by the Roman Empire, and subject to the whims of a Governor like Pilate, one intent on squashing any perceived resistance. This is illustrated in the crowd recapping the vile actions of Pilate toward Galileans. He doesn't just make an example of them; he then defiles them by mixing their blood with the blood of animals used in ritual sacrifice. It's not just an affront to their humanity, it's an affront to Jewish culture and a trampling of what's sacred. It's hard to imagine a more cruel and demeaning death.

So, surely, there must be some reason for this. Surely, the victims must have deserved this cruelty. Surely, they must have sinned beyond reproach. Right?

"No!" Jesus says. Of course they didn't deserve this fate. No more than those who were victims of a terrible accident where the roof fell in at the Tower of Siloam. They are simply the casualty of a corrupt system.

"No, I tell you, but unless you all repent you will perish as they did."

Okay, here's where positivity and an inbreaking realm come in. Jesus is not calling humanity wicked. Jesus is not asserting the crowd is unrighteous. Jesus does not lack empathy for victims of systemic cruelty and tragic accidents. Jesus is just taking an opportunity to remind his followers that calamity and sinfulness are not linked – God is not in the business of doling out retributive justice.

Jesus is reminding his audience to avoid lifelessness and pursue abundant life. Is it fruitful and life-giving to assume exponential sinfulness for the victims of calamity and natural disaster? Is it fruitful

and lifegiving to succumb to the cynical nature of Rome? Is it fruitful and lifegiving to constantly live in a mindset of fear and scarcity? Is it fruitful and lifegiving to always be on guard for judgement day? Is it fruitful and lifegiving to always assume the worst of our neighbors? Is it fruitful and lifegiving to ignore the many privileges we are afforded in order that we might lament, indeed be jealous of the minimal privileges of our marginalized neighbors?

God is NOT coming down to punish us. God is awaiting, eagerly, communion with creation.

When Jesus implores us to repent, he's imploring us to turn toward a loving God and turn away from expecting a God who acts like Pilate. If you believe God manipulates the world with callousness; if you believe God sees you as broken and irredeemable; if you believe God is only as creative, only as compassionate, only as compelling as Caesar, then, yeah, your gonna perish, because that ain't living. The turn, the change, the umph of God's redemption is not retributive. It's restorative. And it beckons us with every ounce of God's affection and authenticity.

And of course, when we are negative, when we live with a sense of imperilment and fear, we tend to believe the clock is ticking. We had better bear fruit, or the master is coming with his sickle. Haven't you heard? It's the age of efficiency, and we're not down with wasted space and worthless.

I bring you good news. God IS NOT an impatient landowner. Read the parable however you want, but that sounds a whole lot more like Caesar to me. This urgency, this angst, this insistence with profits and production.

I believe God is the gardener. The one who knows a thing or two about potential. The one who sees the long game. The one who knows how to offer grace and patience. The one who convinces a stubborn world to love a little harder, to look a little deeper for the inherent value in others. The one who's gonna break soil, who's gonna fertilize, who's gonna actively work to afford every opportunity for the tree to thrive and bear fruit. This is not a parable about time running out. It's a parable about the extension of grace.

Yes, God wants us to be responsible, and accountable, because being those things is real, and life-giving, and fruit-bearing. And yes, I suppose at some point our lives can be exhausted. But the parable says we are in the fourth quarter. And if there's anything I know about March Madness, it's this: the last ten minutes of the game take up more time than the first thirty! God's grace is not in short supply. And neither are our opportunities to receive and experience that grace.

I've said it before and I'll say it again. We can't control when, or how, or even if God chooses to come back. Our bodies, our composition, our mortality prevents us from fully understanding the details of immortal and invisible things.

But here's what we can control. We can control the living of these days. We can choose love. We can choose kindness. We can choose empathy. We can choose emotional and spiritual intelligence. We can choose hope. And we can choose to invest our resources – our time, our talents, our tithes, our spirits, our very lives – toward the love of God and neighbor. We don't need permission to do that. We don't need reward to do that. We don't need a schedule to do that. God has created us good and we can be a reflection of that good.

Fig-ticious
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Bob Stillerman
Luke 13:1-9



There's gonna be Fig Newtons, y'all! We've just go tend each other soil.
And we've gotta gardener with the green thumbs to ensure it.

May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.