

2 Lent 2017 email version with images

2 LENT
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1ST MARSHALL
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PSALM 121; LUKE 13:1-9, 31-35

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

I had an epiphany a few days ago – Thursday morning, as a matter of fact. But **before** that happened, I had a **headache**... I was frustrated because I was getting nowhere with my sermon for this weekend...



Here was the problem: I could not make a...sensible connection between the various parts of today's Gospel passage. It almost felt like I was looking at three unrelated vignettes from Jesus' life, and the only thing holding them together was the fact that...they involved Jesus!

I read articles, I listened to theologians, I even read a few of my old sermons (*that* didn't help!) – nothing helped me find a thread to tie together these seemingly very different stories...And yet...I felt in my bones that something was there – I just couldn't quite make it out.

So I went back to the bible, and read through the passage a few more times. Then finally, after letting the puzzle just sit in my soul for a while - something clicked. It was like the mist in my mind cleared up, the light came on, the sun came out from behind the clouds! Finally, it made sense: the issue in all three segments is the same. It's about the effect of fear on our lives, and what can-and-cannot be done about it.

So...as I mentioned in the announcements, we're going to break-up the passage into its three sections, talk about them individually, and then talk about how they fit together...

**Do you think they were worse
offenders than all others living
in Jerusalem?**

Story #1 Luke 13:1-5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Now, in these verses, we hear how the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate (the **same guy who will condemn Jesus to be crucified in a few short weeks**) has some Jewish worshipers **murdered** while they're offering sacrifices in the Temple. There's a sinister symmetry to it all: the soldiers slaughter the *people* while *they're* slaughtering their *animals*, and all the blood runs together. It's a horrible thing to even consider: people innocently worshiping God are brutally attacked, and left to die even as their prayers die on their lips.

The news horrifies Jesus' listeners, their angst is charged with adrenalin and is coursing through their veins...They wonder, **Why would God allow such a thing...?** And the only **safe** conclusion they can imagine is that people who died so **horribly** **MUST** have **had** it **coming!**

Jesus hears someone say... *they must have done something horrible to deserve a death like that!! Obviously God was punishing them for the evil they had done!*

Jesus hears this fear-fired fluff and shakes his head as he waves off the comment like an annoying fly. Then he cites another story of suffering in which a tower falls over and kills 18 people. With the bite of sarcasm dripping from his words, he snorts at the crowd, *Do you think they died because they were the worst sinners in Jerusalem?* And, lest they were all too thick-headed to catch his tone, he answers his own question with a flat-out *NO! Neither group was killed as punishment for sins*, he tells the frightened crowd.

But, instead of explaining himself, and helping them see the folly of their philosophy about affliction, Jesus tears the spotlight away from those mind-boggling tragedies and shines it on the hearers' own hearts. After each bloody scenario, he says to the people: *but unless you repent...you will all perish just as they did...*

OUCH! As I said two weeks ago, we're smack dab in the middle of Jesus' *CRANKY* stage. He's headed to the cross, to his rejection and death, and he doesn't have the energy or the time to deal with any nonsense.

The incident itself is pretty straight-forward. And, though it's a little strange that Jesus comes off so short-tempered and sharp-toned, still it's understandable given the circumstances.

But, then Jesus suddenly makes another startling shift and we go off onto a different topic altogether – or so it seems at first. The way he launches into his story about the *fruitless fig tree* ...left me scratching my bald head and wondering, *What does a story about a fig-less tree have to do with real accounts of human tragedies?* Well, my friends, put on your thinking caps, 'cause here we go with part two!

For three years I have come
looking for fruit on this fig tree ...
Cut it down! The gardener replied,
Sir, let it alone ... if it bears fruit
next year, well and good; but if
not, you can cut it down.

Story #2 Luke 13:6-9

⁶Then Jesus told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So 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?” ⁸The man replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, then you can cut it down.” ’

For what it’s worth, I looked up an article on fig trees...because I know nothing about them. On one site, someone at *Rutgers University* was quoted as saying that *Most fig trees will not produce a crop for the first **four to five** years* (<http://homeguides.sfgate.com/fig-tree-bear-fruit-49324.html>).

Hmm...how many years had passed?

Only **three** years have passed in Jesus’ story when the impatient farmer comes seeking fresh fruit. Apparently, he’s frustrated that *his* is not an *over-achieving* fig tree, so he orders his gardener to cut it down.

Yet the man pleads with his master to spare the tree and let him nurture it while it matures – with the common sense assertion that giving it one more chance won’t hurt, especially if it gets the tender loving care it needs to thrive and produce. Now, that’s a fine story, but, as with many of his parables, Jesus doesn’t bless us with an explanation.

So here’s the only way I could think of to connect it back to those unsettling accounts of tragic death: maybe Jesus offers the fig-tree story as a way to help the **anxious** people focus on something they **can** do. They’re powerless to prevent either state-sanctioned murder or natural disasters...but they can – and must! – tend to their own hearts’ gardens and the job of bearing fruit as children of God.

Can you think of any other explanation??

**Jesus said to them, Go and tell that
fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out
demons and performing cures
today and tomorrow, and on the
third day I finish my work'**

Story #3 Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' ³²He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem."

³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

It struck me that there's a sub-plot at work in this scenario. Jesus is told that King Herod wants to kill him. Ironically, it was Herod's father, the FIRST King Herod, who tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby, just after the Wise Men came looking for the promised child. Apparently the son plans to prevail where his father had failed! To have a king who wants to kill you is bad enough – to have a death threat that's a family vendetta leaves no doubt in Jesus' mind that it will happen.

Put yourself in Jesus' place. Such news would cause most, if not all, of us to turn tail and run – as fast and as far as we could go... But not Jesus! Says the Lord to the Pharisees: *Go and tell that fox that I have work to do – and that my job won't end until I die in Jerusalem!*

There appears to be no fear – only fierce determination on Jesus' part to accomplish what he'd been sent to do: helping the people God placed in his life, then helping ALL people by dying on the cross.

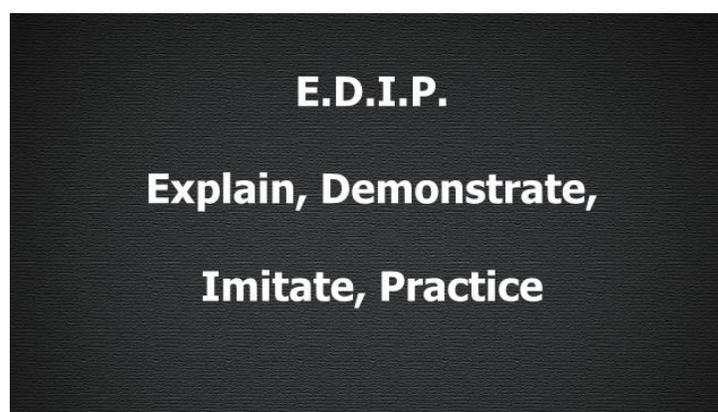
So here's my epiphany, here are the two things that struck me about this collection of stories. The first is this: the over-arching theme that unites them all is the reality of **fear** and how we're to respond to it.



I'm talking, mind-numbing, spirit-quaking, health-compromising **fear**.

When the people hear the horror-stories of brutality and catastrophe, they are consumed by their fear, and they're desperate, determined, driven to find a reason *why*!! Unfortunately, their fear leads them to the horrible conclusion that those who died must have deserved it – talk about punishing the victim for the crime!

And here's the **second**: What's brilliant about Jesus' response is that he seizes the moment as the opportunity to teach – to teach the people about God, about Life, and about themselves. And it's almost as if he's using a method of instruction with the acronym EDIP: Explain, Demonstrate, Imitate, Practice – are any of you educators familiar with that acronym?



Explain, demonstrate, imitate, practice... In the story about the tragedies, Jesus ***explains*** that God does **not** use the **powers** of the **world** to **punish sinners**. As the Apostle Paul says, *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*

Do, if it were true that God punished sinners by killing them, or by allowing them to be killed, then the Lord would have to kill...everyone! In fact, humanity would have been wiped out in the Garden of Eden – and life would have ended before it hardly had the chance to begin.

Then, when Jesus tells his parable of the fruitless fig tree, he gives the people a common-sense explanation of life, and an uncommonly good Gospel promise. In effect, he says, *Don't waste your energy (physical or spiritual) on things you cannot control – don't give in to fear. Instead, tend to what you can: take care of the fig tree of your life – and your calling as God's servant.*

I'll get to Jesus' *gospel promise* that's here in just a moment.

Finally, in the third section, Jesus ***demonstrates*** how to put these truths to work in life. You want to talk about fear? How about being number one on the King's kill list... Does Jesus turn and run? Does he duck and cover? Does he look for some way to escape the end of his journey?

Nope, he's clear about his plan, he's convicted by his calling – and he's committed to demonstrating to his followers how to put his lessons about life into practice.

When it hit me how prevalent the theme of fear is in these verses, I immediately looked to see if there were any good TED talks about fear – and I found a couple of really good ones.

The one I liked best is called: **Rethinking Anxiety: Learning to Face Fear** – by Dawn Huebner, a child psychologist (<http://athingnamed.com/best-ted-talks-on-anxiety-stress-and-fear/>). In short, she offers 3 tools to help people deal with fear.

- correct our thinking mistakes
- externalize worry
- practice

One is that we should **correct** our **thinking mistakes**. When we worry, we tend to make the situation worse by:

- overestimating the likelihood of something bad happening (*if a tragedy can happen, then it probably will!*)
- then we catastrophize it (*if it happens, it'll be a big bad thing!*)
- Finally, we end by giving in to self-doubt (*I'll never survive it!*)

Another tool is to **externalize worry**: in other words, she encourages us to ignore the voice of worry in our heads, and listen instead to the voice of reason. The voice we feed, she said, is the voice we listen to. So, instead, **do something positive** and listen to the voice that gives us hope.

A **third** tool for fighting worry is to **practice** – face the fear in some small way in which we know we'll succeed, and then build on that.

Here's how the psychologist's suggestions seem to play out in our passage from Luke. Jesus challenges the people on their *stinkin' thinkin'*, their thinking mistakes. In short he tells them, ***Don't give in to fear: don't assume that something bad will happen and don't presume that it'll be a catastrophe if it does!***

Then, in the parable Jesus shares, he gets his followers to ***externalize their worry*** by refusing to let them fixate on the tragedies that occurred. Instead, he challenges them to focus on what they **can** do – tend the fig trees of their hearts, minds, bodies, spirits...

And finally, Jesus teaches them (us!) how to ***practice*** facing their fears. In the final section, when the Pharisees bring Jesus their terrible news about the King's murderous thoughts, Jesus faces them head on – with a re-commitment to make his way to Jerusalem.

So I want to end by sharing with you what I think is the Gospel promise that's so beautifully revealed in Jesus' parable about the fruitless fig tree. I got this from one of my favorite theologians, Robert Capon, who's written an amazing set of books on the parables that Jesus teaches.



In Capon's opinion, the irritable owner of the vineyard is cast in that sort of *Old Testament* image of God: kind of harsh, demanding and fearsome. Which means: Jesus is telling the people that **he** himself is the gardener in the story. Capon's proof centers on one single word. When the gardener asks the owner to give him another chance with the tree, he says to the boss, *aphiemi* (ah-FEE-ay-mee): ***Let it alone.***

This word in the Greek can also mean *allow, permit, release, or...forgive...* Maybe ***not*** ironically, this is **also** the very same word that Jesus prays while the Romans nail him to the cross. *Father, let it be...forgive them...for they don't know what they're doing.*

Let it be...forgive them... Jesus is the gardener who will be tending to ***our*** growth, which he shows us all how to accomplish well.

He encourages us to focus on what we have been created and called to do – to love God and love our neighbor in spite of what's happening in the world. He encourages us to refuse to give in to fear, not by virtue of our own reason or strength, but by virtue of his great gift to us: ***GOD'S PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR.***



Says the apostle in I John 4:18

¹⁸There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear...

¹⁹We love because God first loved us.

That's the gift given *to us* by **Christ**. He doesn't **pummel** us with **possible punishments** for our selfish little **sins**, *nor* does he **berate** us for being **bone-headed** with all of our **bad thoughts** or even our **bad behaviors**.

Instead, he promises to teach and train us, to prune and protect us, to feed, forgive and, even, inflame us. In short, our gracious gardener plans to defeat fear, by **fashioning** the **good** fruit of a **Gospel life** in our hearts for the sake of God and for the blessing of our neighbors. Amen.