



God the Gardner



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Exodus 3:1-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Psalms 63:1-8

Luke 13:1-9

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Why do tragedies happen? Why do accidents occur? Why do diseases run rampant? Why do people suffer physical ailments? Why do bad things happen? These are questions that we grapple with time and time again. They are also questions that our ancestors struggled to make meaning of. Our gospel passage today captures a conversation between Jesus and the crowds that revolves around these very questions. As listeners of the story, we enter into an ongoing conversation between Jesus and the gathered crowd. In the passages preceding today's gospel, Jesus, in frustration, has just called the crowd hypocrites, stating that they can read the weather but not the signs of the times. He infers that they just don't get it!

Enter today's gospel passage. Some of the people in the crowd bring up a recent incident, perhaps in an attempt to show Jesus that they are paying attention to current events and are capable of finding theological meaning in them. These individuals mention a brutal slaughter of some Galileans who had gone to Jerusalem to worship. The Roman Governor Pontius Pilate had ordered the slaughter of the Galilean pilgrims. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Jesus asks the crowd.

Throughout Biblical times, physical suffering was widely viewed as a consequence of sin. We can presume that the crowd understood the death of the Galileans as divine punishment for sins they had committed. By highlighting this event, the crowd attempted to show Jesus that they could in fact interpret spiritual matters. They were trying to show Jesus that they did get it! But Jesus didn't think their interpretation of the incident was accurate.

Jesus declares that the Galileans who suffered were not worse sinners than anyone else. He then refers to an accident in Jerusalem in which eighteen people died when a tower fell on them. Those people were no worse than anyone else either. No worse than you. No worse than me. The accident was random. Anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time can be the victim of an accident.

Tragedy is not a punishment for sin. Some tragedies are a result of sin. Sinful behaviors contribute to much of the misery in the world and do account for some tragic occurrences. But the idea that suffering in general is due to personal sinful deeds does not align with Jesus' teachings. Tragedy is not a direct punishment for sin and Jesus shuns the crowds' inferred connection between the two. He also shuns what that connection would say about the nature of God.

So we see Jesus use this encounter as a teaching moment. He shifts the focus from the two incidents of human tragedy to a parable concerning a landowner, a gardener, and a fig tree to illustrate a point about sin, punishment, and God's character.

God, Jesus insists, does not desire or require retributive justice. The people have it all wrong, again. God does not cause towers to fall on people or rulers to murder people in order to have divine retribution. Rather God is like a gardener with a fig tree that has failed to produce fruit. Instead of cutting it down because it failed him, the gardener loosens the soil around it and spreads manure in the hope that it may bear fruit. The gardener does this because he cares for the tree. He does not destroy it because it fails. Rather he tends to it, cultivating it and nurturing it in hope. The prophet Ezekiel says this of God, "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Sovereign Lord. Repent, and live." It seems that Jesus echoes this message in his parable of the fig tree.

A common interpretation of this parable is to assume that the landowner is God and the gardener is Jesus. But nowhere in Luke do we find a picture of an angry God that needs to be mollified by a merciful Jesus. Rather, Jesus in Luke's gospel portrays God as a father who scans the horizon day in and day out waiting for his wayward son to come home and as a woman who after sweeping her house all night looking for a lost coin throws a party costing even more to celebrate that she found it. Given this picture of God's reaction to sin, perhaps it is more accurate to think of God as the gardener in the parable, the one so partial to unyielding fig trees.

And if God cares for the unyielding fig tree, how much more does God care for you and me? That is the unspoken question of this parable. God cares for us and asks only that we repent and return to right relationship with God. God asks that we turn from sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. This is God's response to sin. God does not desire death. God desires repentance. As we continue to journey through Lent, we are invited yet again this day, to turn from sin and to refocus on God. That was Jesus' invitation to the crowd and it's his invitation to us today.

If we take Jesus up on his offer, if we turn to God, repentant of those things that draw us from God, we are not guaranteed a perfect life. The flipside of the crowds' understanding of sin equating with tragic punishment is that if you don't sin then life should be tragedy-free. But Jesus shunned that idea. Sometimes misfortune is of our own making and sometimes we're just tragically unlucky. We see Jesus, using such occasions to invite us to wake up – or in this case, turn around so that we might look differently at our life and world. Jesus takes the tragedies of his day and ours and uses them to jar us into recognizing that life is a gift, that God is seeking us out, and that there is so much good we can do with the time we are given. We do not know how long that time is or how it will come to a close, but we do know it is a gift, not to be squandered but rather spent in the pursuit of good things for God's people.

God invites us not to be daunted by tragedies but rather focused by them on the gifts and good work right in front of us. God is with us in the midst of tragedy working always to bring new life where death threatens to destroy. This is the God Jesus sought to share with the crowds. This is our God who is always digging around our roots, spreading manure in the hope that we'll blossom and bear fruit. God loves us. God loves us enough to hold us accountable for our faults and forgive us our sins time and time again, if we are willing. We are reminded again today of the Lenten invitation to repent, return, and renew. The God of love awaits. Amen.