

## Grow up & Enjoy Life; Grab Your Last Chance

3 Sunday in Lent C

March 19/20, 2022

Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

### Introduction

The warnings are plentiful & blunt on the third Sunday in Lent. Cut it out or get cut down! The warnings are accompanied by God's invitation to attentiveness: "Incline your ear, & come to me; listen, so that you may live." The landowner's ultimatum is forestalled by the gardener's readiness to till the ground one more year. That is good news for all of us. Thanks be to God!

### First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-9

*To those who have experienced long years in exile, the return to their homeland & is a celebration of abundant life. God calls them into an everlasting covenant of love. Those who return to God will enjoy new life & forgiveness, because God's ways are not our ways.*

<sup>1</sup>Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; & you that have no money, come, buy & eat! Come, buy wine & milk without money & without price. <sup>2</sup>Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, & your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, & eat what is good, & delight yourselves in rich food. <sup>3</sup>Incline your ear, & come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. <sup>4</sup>See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader & commander for the peoples. <sup>5</sup>See, you shall call nations that you do not know, & 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. <sup>6</sup>Seek the Lord while the Lord may be found, call upon God while God is near; <sup>7</sup>let the wicked forsake their way, & the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, who will have mercy on them, & to our God, who will abundantly pardon. <sup>8</sup>For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. <sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways & my thoughts than your thoughts.

### Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

*Asked about current tragic events, Jesus turns a lesson about whether suffering is deserved into a hard call to obedience. He then tells a parable that holds out hope that the timeline for ultimate judgment will be tempered by patience.*

<sup>1</sup>At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>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? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” <sup>6</sup>Then Jesus told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; & he came looking for fruit on it & found none. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, & still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ <sup>8</sup>He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it & put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well & good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

### **Overview - Fertilized, Fruitful, & Free**

God’s word for us today is nutritious & wholesome, though hard to digest. The gospel reading seems oddly brutal alongside the abundance & comfort of the texts from Isaiah (“delight yourselves in rich food”) & Psalm 63 (“My spirit is content as with the richest of foods”). Even Paul finds himself using physical sustenance as a metaphor (“they drank from the spiritual rock, . . . & the rock was Christ”). Surrounded by this food imagery, we now find Jesus using some horrific events as illustrations. After the mingled blood & fallen towers, it may be hard to hear the fig-tree parable as the grace-full story it really is. But here is Christ himself as gardener: digging, fertilizing, protecting, & nurturing us. We are fragile creatures, living in a world of tragedy & terror, but God does not punish fragility with death. On the contrary, God sent Jesus to us so that we may live. Living in that nurtured garden of Christ, tended to & cared for as we grow in that love, how can we keep from blossoming? Live, yes, & live fruitfully, our gospel proclaims! Grow, yes, & grow gloriously! Now the good news of Christ’s redeeming mercy becomes clear: we are each treated with boundless mercy, not impartial justice. While the world may want to blame the withering tree for its inability to be productive, our Savior & Lord reaches into our lives, reminds us of our roots, nourishes us with grace, & allows us to bloom, to flourish, to freely share our gifts with the world.

### **Book**

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (rev. ed.), author Michelle Alexander reflects on the changing landscape of the penal system in the United States, describing the more than sixfold increase in the number of incarcerated people between 1980 & 2000. “By the end of 2007, more than 7 million Americans—or one in every 31 adults—were behind bars, on probation, or on parole” (New York: New Press, 2012, p. 60). The majority of this increase is made up of

people of color. Alexander explores (& debunks) the common belief that (predominantly nonwhite) urban areas are more violent & crime ridden than other places & that this explains the high number of incarcerated people of color. Her book provides a contemporary illumination of Jesus' challenge to his listeners who assumed that people suffer because they are guilty of greater wrongdoing.

### **Website**

According to the website [GardeningKnowhow.com](http://GardeningKnowhow.com), most fig trees produce fruit in two years. However, it can take some trees up to six years to mature enough to bear fruit. Jesus' use of the fig tree in this parable invites us to draw a connection between (spiritual) maturity & good fruit; adequate time must be granted for the process of maturing. But that raises the question, How much time is enough? The illustration lays out both an expectation of growth in faith & a promise of patience on God's part that allows us to grow at our own pace.

### **Theological Reflection**

The call to repentance is not merely an expression of the law but also an invitation grounded in grace. It invites us to lay down our facades of righteousness & be freed of the burden to look good when we are struggling. The beginning of today's passage from Isaiah invites reflection, confession, & repentance that can be particularly freeing: Where are we spending money that doesn't bring true joy or peace? Where or how are we laboring without producing meaningful contribution, security, or hope? Who is telling us we must continue in practices that don't build up us or anyone else, & how can we listen to the invitation from God to be freed for different choices that satisfy?

### **Visual Image / Artwork**

Isaiah 55:9 calls to mind the famous images of [Earth viewed from space](#) that have been possible since the Apollo moon mission of 1968. One of the most striking aspects of these images is the reminder that the borders that divide nations & peoples are all human constructs. (Even God's call to the people of Israel to be God's own people has moved beyond the limits of human geography.) God does not view the divisions that often claim such high devotion in human society the same way we do. The human tendency to devalue one another based on which side of an imaginary line we live is one of the things for which humankind has constantly to repent.

### **Website**

In Jesus' parable we generally connect the image of the owner of the fig tree with God, but many listeners may relate this conversation more directly to their own struggles. Especially for people who have a loved one struggling with an addiction or mental health problem, the question of patience may be a confusing & challenging issue. Is continued patience the Christian thing to do? Does continually showing patience support the struggling loved one, or does it end up merely supporting their addiction/illness? The website Verywell Mind offers some [helpful insight](#) into the importance of & need for both compassion/patience & the setting of boundaries to help limit destructive patterns. It's an interesting exercise to look at God's patience with us through this lens as well.

## Website

Rainer Zitelmann writes in [Forbes](#) magazine about recent research that debunks the idea that money only increases happiness up to a certain level. Zitelmann cites evidence that more money correlates to more happiness even above the \$75,000 threshold previously thought to be the "happiness cap." (An [article](#) about similar findings in a study from the Wharton School offers additional insight.) In contrast, authors Elizabeth Dunn & Chris Courtney, writing in [Harvard Business Review](#), offer perspective on *which kinds* of spending tend to actually increase happiness. Money spent on experiences or invested in other people tends to bring the most satisfaction.

## Theological Reflection

Repentance can be a tricky concept, especially as the idea appears in today's gospel. "Unless you repent you will all perish" transforms pretty quickly into "I gotta ask God to forgive me or I'm gonna go to hell." But simply admitting that what we did was wrong so we can ask God to forgive us isn't repentance; without a change of heart it's nothing more than a good-works expression of magical thinking designed to comfort us with the idea that we're off the hook. Repentance assumes the perspective of "I did this, I wish I hadn't, & I never want to do it again." While we always trust the promise of God's forgiveness, it might be enlightening to do the confession *without* asking God to forgive us—shifting the emphasis from what we want for our own sake to how we want to change for God's sake.

## [Luke 13:1-9](#)

Luke, who wrote his gospel in perhaps 85 ce for an especially Gentile audience, dedicates chapters 9:51—19:28 to Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, the city which Luke sees as the starting point for the Christian mission. Pilate had slain some Jews while they were sacrificing in the temple, & Luke, a consummate narrator, uses this event to prefigure the sacrificial death of Jesus himself. Jesus' words urging his

followers to repentance & amendment of life fit well with Luke's repeated emphasis on forgiveness. Fig trees, which required little rain, were prized for both sweet fruit & welcome shade. Luke has turned the narrative in Mark & Matthew of Jesus cursing the barren fig tree into a parable about God's mercy. Soon Jesus himself, like some Galileans, will die at the h& of Pilate. Although the passage includes the commonplace religious idea that God punishes sinners, Luke's rendition of the fig tree stresses instead divine mercy. We are granted yet another year: be glad for the manure.

### Isaiah 55:1-9

In this 6<sup>th</sup> century bce poem from 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, the promise that the God of Israel made to the descendants of David has been universalized to apply to all nations. God, whose mercy is beyond understanding, welcomes everyone who repents to enjoy a feast of forgiveness. The return from exile signals a renewal of all of life. The poem from 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah provides apt bkgd for the gospel from Luke. Human notions about punishment & mercy are different from God's exuberant covenant invitation to pardon & free food. Christians have interpreted this poem as a call to the sacraments of baptism & communion, & think of Lent as a time for seeking this God who wishes to be found.

### **Images in the Readings**

Throughout the Bible, the **fig tree** is cited both for its fruit & for its broad-leaf shade. Other historic literature also uses the fig tree as especially significant: for example, both Augustine & the Buddha were sitting under a fig tree when they came to their enlightenment. In Luke's parable, the gardener is surprisingly merciful to the unproductive fig tree. That the fig tree is in a vineyard would suggest to first-century Jews the tradition of describing Israel as God's vineyard. Although much in Christian history has used the Bible to condemn Judaism, Paul's hermeneutic exemplifies one original Christian use of the Hebrew Scriptures: the first Testament is interpreted as proclaiming the same divine mercy as was embodied in Christ. So the church fathers wrote of Isaiah's reference to **water, wine, & bread** as helping Christians reflect on baptism & eucharist, & Paul describes the history of Israel using Christian vocabulary of **baptism & spiritual food & drink**. Paul believed that Christians have been incorporated into God's pattern of mercy, thus allowing Christians to use Jewish history, legend, & poetry to illumine the life, death & resurrection of Christ. For this reason, the lectionary illumines the gospel readings with selections from the Old Testament. Especially since 9/11, the sentence in Luke about the **tower of Siloam** calls us to refrain from blaming the victims of tragedy. God's ways are not our ways. The human desire to find a reason for suffering often leads to conclusions that Christianity cannot support theologically.

*Thanks to [Sundays&Seasons.com](http://Sundays&Seasons.com); [MinistryMatters.com](http://MinistryMatters.com); [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org);  
[Montreal.Anglican.org](http://Montreal.Anglican.org)*