

## A PARABLE OF PATIENCE

ISAIAH 55:1-9  
LUKE 13:1-9

A SERMON FOR LENT  
SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2013  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
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The conversation between Jesus and His disciples gives us a rare look into the ancient world, into the tragedies and disasters which occurred then as they do now.

The two events referred to, the slaughter of the Galileans by the soldiers of Pontius Pilate, and the fall of the tower at Siloam, no doubt were the equivalent in the news of the day of a terrorist bomb blast and the man being sucked into a sink hole while lying in his own bed. They were terrible and awful and newsworthy, but not of historical importance or note.

What seems strange is the reaction of Jesus: He offers no sympathy, no sorrow, no grief, but responds almost tersely: "Unless you repent, you will likewise perish."

Here are two terrible happenings, one an accident the other an act of political violence, and Jesus responds with what seems at first blush a judgmental demand for repentance.

But then, in His inimitable style, Jesus tells them a parable. And it is as folksy, as humble, and as confusing as any parable Jesus ever told. We might call it the Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree.

Have you ever had a fig tree? We had two in the backyard of the manse we lived in in Leland, Mississippi. They grew on either side of the back gate, and we had to keep them trimmed back to get in and out of the gate. They gave gallons, no bushels, of figs every year, with no fertilizing, no cultivating, no tending at all.

Jesus talked about fig trees several times, even blasted one once, and I used to have a series of fig tree sermons, but all that remains is the memory of the fertile, fecund, fruitful fig trees that may still be standing in that Mississippi Delta back yard.

Now if we would allegorize this parable, it is easy to cast God the Father, who not only created but will judge heaven and earth, in the role of the land owner, who instructs the gardener to cut the tree down. We then cast the nation of Israel, which is not bearing fruit fit for the kingdom of God, as the fig tree. And who is the gardener, who intercedes on behalf of the tree? Well, that is none other than Jesus Christ.

We've been studying the Westminster Standards in the course on Presbyterian Beliefs that I've been teaching, and this parable is one that fits right in with those crusty old Calvinists. Their perspective, and it is an accurate one, is that we are all worthy of condemnation, that as the Apostle Paul put it so well, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Or, as the Psalmist said it, "There is none that is righteous, no, not one." Only those who are sorry for their sins, who repent, who turn away from them, will be saved, will be spared in the judgment. And it is only because of God's grace, because of God's patience, that we all haven't already been condemned.

This parable is a parable about judgment: "Cut it down!" But it is a parable about grace: "Give it more time." And it is a parable about patience, because grace wins out, and the fig tree, Israel, the sinful world, is given more time.

Now there is no ending to the story. We don't know if the efforts of the gardener, the over and above efforts that no one ever put into a fig tree, caused the tree to produce fruit or not. We don't know if the land owner then told the gardener to whack away and if he did or not. We are left in suspense, not knowing how the story ends, not knowing how long the patience will last.

This is a play in three acts: cut it down, give it time, and we are now living out the third act. How long will the Master wait? Who long is the patience of God? How long does God wait for us to be fruitful? Surely God's patience is infinite, for God is infinite, but our lives are not infinite, our lives have an ending.

How long does God wait for the sinner to repent, to turn from wicked ways to follow the ways of righteousness? Surely God's patience is infinite, for God is infinite, but our lives are not infinite, our lives have an ending.

And now I think I'm beginning to understand what Jesus was saying: those Galileans that the Romans slaughtered in the very shadow of the temple were no worse sinners than anyone else, and were no more expecting to die that day than anyone else.

And those people at Siloam, whether they were construction workers working on a project that collapsed, or innocent bystanders when an earthquake happened, they were no worse sinners than anyone else, and they were no more expecting to die that day than anyone else.

Every day we live is a gift from God. Every day we live is a proof of God's patience. As with the call of Jesus to His disciples, every day we live, we should repent of our sins. As with the parable of the unfruitful fig tree, every day we live we should know that we are under judgment, and live but for the grace of God. But we bear fruit not out of the fear of the Lord, but out of gratitude for what the gardener has done for us, and for God patiently taking time with us and for us.

I recently read two stories about people who were acutely aware of God's patience, of God's timing: one woman diagnosed with cancer who prayed every day for God to heal her. After a year's time, as she entered her third chemotherapy, she said, "Well, it looks like God isn't on my schedule. I guess God's decided to heal me at some other place, in some other time." I think God had given her the same year that was given the fig tree and more.

The other was a man who had survived dangerous but necessary heart surgery. He was told by the doctor that he had at best a fifty-fifty chance to survive the procedure, but that he had a zero chance at living another year without it. When his pastor visited him after the surgery, he said, "You did survive after all! Isn't that wonderful!" The patient replied, No, preacher, I didn't survive. I did more than survive. I was born again. I'm not the same person I was for the past fifty years. I've been given a second chance and I'm going to be different, better than before."

That man and that woman, both understood God's judgment, God's grace, and God's patience.

Let us pray.

Lord, though we fully deserve judgment, you have patience to give us time to allow our lives to become closer to your life. Give us what we need, to use the time that you give us so that we might more fully give ourselves to you, in your name we ask it. Amen.

