

*March 20, 2022*  
*Third Sunday of Lent*  
*Luke 13:1-9*

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. He said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!

Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!"

And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'"



### **Background**

The description of the two tragic events in this Sunday's gospel are unique to Luke. They also reveal a basic understanding of people of his day, namely that bad things happen to people as punishment for their transgressions.

There are also some elements in the text that may not be immediately apparent to the reader. Pilate's deed reported here is not substantiated by history, but this is in keeping with his reputation, and therefore there is no reason to doubt that it did occur. Pilate was the representative of an occupying foreign government that was greatly disliked. Galilee was known as a center of political animosity toward Rome. Having people murdered while they were in the midst of ritual offering of sacrifice, thereby mingling their blood with the blood of the animals being sacrificed, would be disgusting and exemplify Pilate's crudity. The dilemma for Jesus was that if he remained silent when informed of Pilate's actions, he would lose credibility with the people. If he spoke out against Pilate, he would be seen as an anarchist.

The other incident mentioned in the text is that some innocent people had a portion of the temple wall collapse on them. The location would have been near the pool of Siloam. Historical records cannot authenticate this incident either. But as it is presented in the gospel, there is a presumption that the victims had received punishment for some sin. Jesus does not affirm their belief that these things happened as punishment to either set of the victims. He turns the concern of the crowd to a warning that all need to be prepared for the unexpected: Be aware of your own sinfulness, and turn toward God before some unexpected event comes upon you.

After that admonition, Jesus then tells a parable that focuses on the compassionate mercy of God. The people of Israel were often portrayed as the vineyard of Yahweh, and the crowd would likely see themselves in the parable. The fig tree that is planted within the orchard would represent the

leaders of the people. Fig trees usually bear fruit ten months of the year. When planted, their fruit is not picked for three years while the tree matures. The fruit of the fourth year is given in sacrifice to God. Because this is the third year the owner has come looking for his fruit, the tree would be presumed to be in its seventh year. The tenant farmer is suggesting that the tree be given an additional year to mature, in hope that it will begin to produce figs. In this culture, everything is believed to be in limited supply, even the nutrients of the earth. To suggest that an unproductive tree be given additional care and nurturing would seem extravagant, and perhaps even wasteful, to the people of the day.

Jesus makes his point about the abundance of God's mercy with a bit of humor. The gardener who has suggested nurturing the tree with more fertilizer would be using only one kind of fertilizer, manure. The unproductive tree would be understood to represent the religious and civil elite of the day, who are not taking their responsibilities seriously but instead are living well off the fruits of the labors of others. A common person in the crowd would delight in the thought of a gardener liberally spreading manure around the base of a fig tree, imagining the religious and civil leaders being liberally covered in manure.

### Reflection Questions

1. What are your thoughts and feelings as you hear of tragic deaths of innocent people, like those being killed in the war taking place in the Ukraine?
2. How do you respond to people who seem to think that negative events happen to people because of their sinfulness?
3. How do you think God responds to the tragedies that occur in the world?
4. How do you respond to Jesus' suggestion that the gardener fertilize the fig tree one more year?
5. When and how have you been reminded of your own need for repentance? Did the reminder come with a smile, or with some other feelings?
6. Have you ever doubted the mercy of God toward yourself?
7. Can you take some time now to talk to God honestly about your own need for forgiveness, your fear that you are not truly forgiven of some past sinfulness, or your gratitude for God's forgiveness?

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