

Albany Presbyterian Church
23rd March 2025

In Luke 13, the beginning of the chapter we look at briefly last week, Jesus learns about two significant events of the day. The first involved the execution of several Galileans in Jerusalem by Pilate, the governor of Judea, under Roman rule. The second was an accident that killed 18 people from the collapse of a tower near the pool of Siloam in the Temple. As we also talked about, Pilate was notorious for his brutality and violence and played a key role in provoking the first Jewish revolt (66-73 CE). Scholars like Josephus documented how he and the Roman Empire would not tolerate dissent. Revolts against the Empire were escalating during that time, with one of the most notable rebels being the Zealots, and Barabbas, whom the people sought to save during Jesus's trial, was the founder of the Zealots. The Galileans in the story were likely arrested and killed on suspicion charge of insurrection and plotting against the Empire. To emphasize his point, Pilate further exhibited his brutality by mixing their blood with the sacrifices made to his gods, which were in the temple dedicated to God in Jerusalem.

The way that Jesus responds is quite surprising.

Jesus says in verse 3, “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all others because they suffered this way?” No! he said, but unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Likewise, for those who were killed in the accident when the tower in Siloam fell on them, Jesus asked, “Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

People in Jesus's time believed that individuals always deserved whatever happened to them, and they suffered because of their or their ancestor's sins. A similar story is told of a boy born blind in John's gospel, where the disciples ask whose fault it is that he was born blind. Also, in the story of Job, despite his protests, Job's friends conclude that he must have done something wrong to deserve what happened to him and his family.

In 2004, on Boxing Day, earthquakes and a Tsunami hit Thailand, affecting 406 islands, destroying 47 islands, and killing 5400 people, including many foreign tourists. I remember being in Dunedin then and the media covering the disasters.

I remember people asking... what caused this and typical questions about why God would allow this to happen to these innocent people.

So many violent wars and conflicts make the news daily, including the most recent ones in Ukraine. It is heartbreaking to know of those who make a mockery out of desperate situations. Much of what we see and experience today reflects our disillusionment with a world where inequality thrives, deepening the divide between the rich and the poor and empowering those who already hold control over the weak and marginalized.

A friend recently shared this on social media from **Brian Turner and his book *Boundaries***, published in 2015, which reminded me of modern-day Pilate and the Galilean.

“Falty (royalty) to oligarchs (wealthy business leaders who wield political power—a term originating from the collapse of the Soviet Union) and their ilk (those who are similar) anywhere is shameful and debilitating. There's much to dislike about the tenor of our times. Worldwide, a foolish dependence on churned-out, unnecessary, wasteful, and disposable short-lived essentials indicates a lack of discrimination, resulting in utter irresponsibility. And it's our fault: many of those we elect are not leaders; they follow what, at heart, is failing us.”

Jesus does not engage in political commentary—he does not give judgment, shame, blame, apathy, or indifference. Instead, he shifts our perspective on the world's affairs and warns us. In verses 3 and 5, he says, “Unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Then, he tells a parable about a fig tree. A man had a vineyard with a fig tree in it. For three years, the owner of the vineyard came to look for fruit but found none. This can be confusing when compared to a story in Mark 11, where Jesus encountered an actual fig tree on his way to Jerusalem and cursed it for not bearing any fruit. However, this is a parable. The gardener tending to the vineyard was present; the owner complained and instructed him to cut the tree down, saying, ‘Why should it take up the soil?’ The gardener pleaded for patience and suggested leaving it for one more year. He said, “I will dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, great! If not, then cut it down.”

The fig tree symbolizes the spiritual life of God's people alongside the vine, a well-known metaphor. Does that make the gardener Jesus and the vineyard owner the Lord God? The three years represent Jesus' ministry, while the additional year symbolizes a second chance and reflects the urgency of Jesus' voice, for the opportunity for repentance is time-limited.

The fruitless fig tree symbolizes the widespread apathy and indecision of those who listened to Jesus, reflecting its barrenness and wasted soil. The gardener nurtures the tree, prepared to provide the necessary care to help it bear fruit, representing Jesus's ministry. He pleads with the vineyard's owner, who rebukes the tree and intends to cut it down. The gardener representing Jesus vows to continue caring for the tree by digging around the roots and adding manure to enrich the soil and enhance productivity.

The manure, or fertilizer, can symbolize humiliation, the cross, Jesus' death, resurrection, repentance, and confession. Philippians 2:6 says, "We claim as our own the humility of Christ, who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." And the cross of Jesus, his death and resurrection, becomes the fertilizer that makes us bear the spiritual fruit God desires.

Mark Mash says, "Tyrants, fallen towers, and tragedy heighten the preciousness of life and enhance our awareness of how we live. They deepen the value of relationships and encourage us to reflect on how we treat creation and one another. They amplify the significance of this moment and remind us that nothing should be wasted or taken for granted. They elevate the urgency and necessity to redeem the past and open our eyes and hearts to a new and better way, to the potential of the impossible. They enhance the need to examine ourselves and our world with fresh perspectives, to perceive each other in new ways, and [to gain clarity](#) about what truly matters and how we wish to live. "

That is what it means to "repent"—metanoia in Greek—turning to God, changing our hearts and minds, and being transformed in our actions and attitudes through the deepest thoughts and aches of our hearts in a quest for reconciliation and renewal. "To examine ourselves and our world with fresh perspectives, to perceive each other in new ways, and [to gain clarity](#) about what truly matters and how we wish to live. " To answer God's invitation to repentance, as in Isaiah 55, God calls us to turn to the Lord, and he says God will have mercy on us, for God will freely forgive.

As we know, Isaiah 55 is a prophecy written for the exiles enduring the harsh realities of life in Babylon soon after their capture, which shifts from the despair of the previous chapters. Isaiah speaks of hope and restoration, urging perseverance, faithfulness, and obedience to God's Word. This is also the prophecy relevant throughout the History of God's people, where we hear the message of hope in our present despair and suffering.

"Come all who are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have no money. Come, buy, and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost." This reminds us of the free grace of God, an abundance of his love, and a relentless desire to give us hope and life. In verse 2, "Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest fare. Give ear and come to me, hear me, that your soul may live," meaning the hearing of the Word. "Seeking the Lord while he may be found" in verse 6; call on him while he is near.

Today, we are invited to hear again through the story of Luke 13 and the reading of Isaiah 55 how God's mercy operates; while His judgment is just and true, it is always tempered by divine mercy. This reflects Paul's statement in Romans 3:24: His grace justifies us as a gift through the redemption of Christ Jesus. And we are to prepare for the approaching end of the age, remember that the time for repentance is very short, echoing Jesus' words: unless you repent, you too will all perish.

This is what we are called to do during the season of Lent: by fasting...taste the richest God's mercy of his word, examine our hearts through prayer, and turn to God in repentance to take this invitation to be transformed and renewed. We are at the mercy of the hands of God, our gardener, as much as we are at the mercy of God's love. Calling us to Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. Come all of you... Thanks be to God. Amen.