

Sermon by The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche
March 11, 2007
Luke 13:1-9

1937 years ago, the great city of Jerusalem fell. Herod's Temple was knocked to the base, and the city was burned. People ran from the flames. Many died. In modern Jerusalem, you can still see evidence of what happened so long ago. In the tunnels that run alongside the temple mount, there are areas of stone, exposed to flames, that date back to the tragic year 70. Death and Destruction: welcome to your third sermon for Lent. According to what we know of the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, tensions had been high for quite some time. Jerusalem, in the time of Jesus and after, was hardly the Israelite city of David's or even Solomon's time. It was a city controlled by the horrific Herod's and the castigating Caesars. The Romans controlled the province of Judea, where Jerusalem is, and the Jews eventually rebelled. The Jews were an occupied people. Even Herod, the Jewish King had been compromised and was a vassal for Rome. He had sacrificed to the gods in Rome. And then Herod who had sacrificed to the gods, ordered that the Temple in Jerusalem be built. In a very real sense, even the Temple was controlled by someone who practiced paganism and was under Rome's control. And there is also this important tidbit about the Herod-built Jewish Temple: The only people able to build the insides of the Temple were priests because they were the only people allowed into the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies. Hence, there were lots of priests on the government payroll: created, hired, and maintained, in effect, by the Romans. Even the priests of the Temple and the Temple itself, the very centers of religious life, were evidence of a torn and corrupted society. The tensions were as high as any modern contemporary Middle East conflict.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear that some people gather around Jesus. And we hear the people discuss these exact same tension between the Romans and Jews, some forty years before the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. According to Luke, these people tell Jesus that Pilate, another Roman like Herod, has murdered some Galileans and that Pilate has mingled those Galileans' blood with their sacrifices to God. It is a story that is not only known from the Gospels. In fact, many believe that we have the same story recorded by the Jewish Historian Josephus. Josephus, writing in the first century, speaks of Pilate hiring his men to work around a group of Galileans who were actively rebelling against the Roman rule. Pilate seemed to receive the protests well, but when he gave a signal, his soldiers stabbed the Galileans for their in-subordinance. This was the Roman way of keeping the peace, the Pax Romana. Protest equals death. You can see why tensions were ripe and why 40 years later, they would explode in rebellion.

But in today's Gospel, the tragic end of the City and Temple has not yet been seen. It is only a few people, Galileans, killed. Yet, still, the people want answers to their turmoil. And they gather around this man who has been touted as the Messiah, the son of God. They want Jesus, if he is the Messiah, to fix their problems. They want him to rise up and squish the Romans. They want Jesus to give Pilate and Herod a dose of their own medicine. They want an implosion, and they want Jesus to light the fuse. And they believe that if God is who they think God is, God's son will do this and secure this freedom for them.

As we know, Jesus does not respond as requested. He does not cast a protection charm over the people or Jerusalem or even himself. He does not exhibit military precision or acumen. Instead, Jesus cryptically responds: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" These words do seem cryptic. It seems that Jesus is not responding to the gathered people. While they want a response to Rome, Jesus responds to something else. And this something else is what I would like to talk about today, because Jesus here is, I believe, talking about how we should and should not look at God, what that means for our world, and how we should view our relationship with each other and God as a result. Jesus is essentially giving those gathered people and us real answers to the problems of the world. And this wisdom, perhaps more than death and destruction, do make for a fitting theme in the third week of Lent.

First, the question of how we should and should not look at God. Here, we have to reflect upon the very way that people in Jesus' time, and sometimes our time, look at God. Most people in Jesus' saw God as a quid pro quo being. If you did good, God would reward you. If you did bad, God would punish. If Jesus was God, he should defeat the Romans. If Jesus is not God, he should be punished and perhaps even crucified. And the protesting, killed Galileans who seemed noble to the gathered people, could not fit into the theology of a quid pro quo God. In fact, anyone who suffers or asks "Why me?" does also not fit into such a theology. Unfortunately, such a way of looking at God still persists. Televangelists such as Joel Olsteen and others still preach a Gospel of worldly success are prime examples. Jesus demands that this belief of God be questioned and de-constructed. And he does not only do so with his words today. He will ultimately do so with his life when he as an innocent, blameless man, is sentenced to death.

Secondly, the implications of this belief for humanity. Jesus says, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." And this is not a statement about God but about the result of our belief in a quid pro quo God. Jesus is saying that if we insist on a belief that God is a be good, get rewarded/be bad and get punished being, we will most likely follow that belief to destructive ends. We will demand worldly success because it is the only way that we will believe that we can trust in God or live without fear. We will fight, and we will demand more, and more simply to prove that we are connected positively to God. And worse, we will have no empathy for the victims of the world. We will believe that they deserve what they get. An eye for an eye. Illness doled out for sin. In a very real sense, when we fall into this line of thinking, we are falling into practicing the Roman Peace instead of the Peace of God. Winning and success will be the only acceptable results in the world. Jesus says that while most people believe that such faith will lead us to God, it will actually lead us away from God and to our own misery. In a sense, the winners will be revealed to be losers. But this is not a misery caused by God, but by ourselves. It is simply that the chickens will come home to roost. Our belief in a wrathful, judgmental God will produce wrathful and judgmental people, families, and societies.

And finally, how we should view our relationships with others and God. "[Jesus] told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on

this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" This parable, as most parables, has been interpreted in many ways. But I want to say that the man who owns the vineyard is all of huMANity. We all own the vineyard. We all care for this fig tree. The fig tree is our world, and while we sometimes spiral toward self-destruction, view God as wrathful, demand success, and have no respect for victims or dying fig trees, Jesus invites us to look at God and the world in a different way. He invites us to love our world and ourselves and even those we see as useless. And he gives us the nutrients that we need to be that different sort of organism. He essentially invites us to do as he has done, becoming the gardener who tends the earth and the weak, instead of the owner who demands control of the earth of what is legally his.

We could easily come away from these lessons with the idea that we, fig tree humanity, have a long way to go to bear fruit. And yet, I want to say that we, and the whole world, have been transformed by the life and fertilizer of Jesus. Look at our movies and how we tell stories of our culture. They are always told from the perspective of the victim. This was not possible before Jesus, because victims were the bad guys who had done something wrong. Look at the reality that hospitals exist. Without the Gospel, and Jesus' words we heard today, hospitals would not exist because there would be no concern for those who were ill because they would be seen as getting their just reward. And even look at wars. Though we fight wars and do injustice, the fact that we have ideals to treat the wounded, even of our enemies' wounded, with respect, is rooted in this idea that our maladies in life are not a punishment from God.

Jerusalem's will fall. America will fall. Abuses will persist. Our lives and families will be sometimes peppered with pain. But our hope is not in those things. Our hope is in Christ, the one who was crucified, and the one who shows the favor and hope of God not through success, and easy peace, but by meeting those problems of the world and the false peace of Rome with the real peace of God. Jesus meets even a dying tree with rich soil and love. Unfortunately for us, this world, our fig tree, seems to be taking longer than a year to blossom. But we have also not cut ourselves down, and in that is a very real hope that with time, our tree, our world, will come into full bloom.