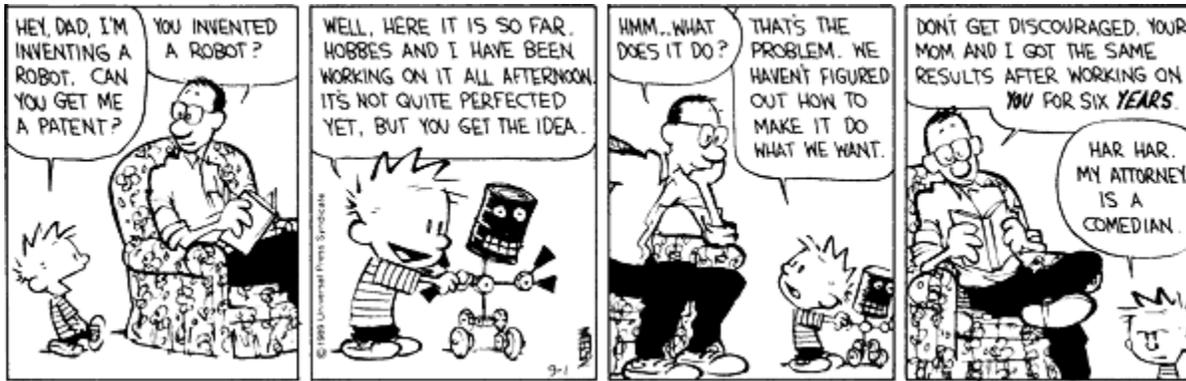


C Lent 3
2013 March 3
Luke 13.1-9
"No Figs? Manure."



Our gospel passage for today is fundamentally about repentance. It's about turning oneself around, because that is really fundamental to the meaning of the word metanoia, the Greek word translated here and elsewhere as repentance.

Before we go in that direction, however, let's set these nine verses in Luke's gospel in their context. The preceding verses have a definite apocalyptic flavor. That is, they look forward to the Day of the Lord, when the Lord will come to judge and redeem and renew and make whole.

For example, at the end of chapter 12 Jesus warns his listeners that they are to be dressed for action and to have their lamps lit, because they do not know when their master will return from the wedding banquet. They are blessed if they are alert and ready when the master arrives, for then they will be ready to serve him, whether he comes in the middle of the night or at dawn.

And in the same way, at the end of chapter 12, Luke records Jesus telling his followers that they must be ready in the same way for the coming of the Son of Man, because the owner of a house can never know when a thief will come to break into the house.

And in the same way, when the master of a household goes on a long journey and places his manager in charge of the slaves, he expects that manager to do his job: to manage the household and the slaves well. But if the manager mistreats the slaves and gets drunk, the master will return on a day that the manager could never anticipate, and throw him out. The manager must know what the master wants of him, and do it.

Jesus says that he has come to bring fire to the earth, and division among peoples, even families. He warns his listeners that they must be able to interpret the times, in the same way that they read the sky to determine if it will rain or be dry.

All of these parables and teachings will be familiar to many of you. They are repeated in all of the synoptic gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as warnings that the followers of Jesus are to be on their guard, to be alert, to be ready for his return. Many of you will recognize that we visit some of these texts every year during the Season of Advent, as we watch and wait expectantly for the birth of the King, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Our reading for today follows on the tail of all of these things. We read about the tragedies that happen to a group of Galileans making their sacrifices and a tower that falls, followed by a parable about a barren fig tree. The context of the twin tragedies and the parable give us a major clue about their interpretation.

We are to be thinking about the last days, when time is short, when we must be alert and ready for the return of Jesus himself, when we must be about his business. If the context is really important then repentance is a part of that business.

Repentance. It means more than being sorry. It means actually doing something about sinful behavior. It means turning away from attitudes and practices which are sinful, and turning toward a more Christ-like way of living. It is the continuous and continuing component of the process we call sanctification, which all of us undergo, in which the Holy Spirit acts in our lives to make us more holy, more like Jesus. That means that repentance is not just a work that we perform, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

This lesson, and all of the apocalyptic ones that come before it, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. His journey to the cross has begun.

A group of people, probably his traveling companions from Galilee, come to him and ask about other Galileans, quote, "whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." There is no other source of this event, so all we have to go on is these few words. Apparently Pontius Pilate was enraged at these Galileans, so for some reason he had them killed by his Roman soldiers in the temple in Jerusalem, where they had come to offer sacrifices.

We don't know what the motivation of the questioners is. Perhaps they wanted to see if Jesus could make some sense of this tragedy, in the same way we try to make sense of tragedies when they happen to us, to those close to us, or to those on the other side of the world. Or perhaps they expected Jesus to be incensed that some of his neighbors had been slaughtered in cold blood by Pilate. Jesus doesn't offer an explanation, and he doesn't become enraged.

In keeping with the theme of the preceding verses, in which it is clear that time is short and the Day of the Lord is soon coming, Jesus simply tells his questioners that these innocents were no more guilty than any other people. That response is given to them just in case they think, as many of their countrymen did, that punishment from God followed from some kind of sin, either one's own sin or the sin of one's ancestors. No, Jesus says. Rather, his message to them is: Repent, or you will also perish.

And then he brings up a parallel event that they did not even pose to him. Apparently a tower had fallen at Siloam in Jerusalem, and eighteen people had been killed in the collapse. Jesus asks the crowd, do you think these people were more sinful than all the other residents of Jerusalem? No! He replies. Rather, he says, look at yourselves, your own lives. Unless you repent, you will also perish.

He doesn't say so, but the context makes it clear. Don't be too slow to repent, either, because you do not know when the Day of the Lord will come upon you, and then it will be too late.

We all excel at finding fault in others. Remember that wonderful teaching from Matthew in which Jesus reminds us that we are great at finding specks in the eyes of others when we have logs in our own eyes. Cut it out! Jesus says. Instead of looking for fault in others, examine your own life. Find your own sin. Repent. Turn around. Leave that sin behind (by the power of the Holy Spirit). Go in a new direction. Do it quickly, because the Son of Man is coming soon.

It all sounds pretty harsh and dire. But he follows this strict warning with a story of grace, the story of the barren fig tree.

A landowner has a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he becomes incensed because the tree has failed to bear any fruit for three years. He tells his gardener to cut it down. He can replace it with another tree that will bear fruit. But the gardener pleads on behalf of the tree. Sir, he says, let me loosen the soil around the tree and work in manure around it. Come back next year, and if it has still not produced any fruit, I will cut it down. We do not know if the landowner is convinced or not, but the likely conclusion is that he is: he gives the tree another year.

The meaning is pretty clear in the context of the preceding verses. Yes, we are expected to repent, to turn around, and to turn away from particular sins. Remember that we are partners with the Holy Spirit in that enterprise. It is only with the help of the Spirit, or in conjunction with the Spirit, that we are able to make ourselves more holy.

The story of the fig tree reminds us that God is on our side. Yes, we are expected to repent and turn, but God gives us another year to get it done. And perhaps more than one year. And not only that, but there is someone who cares about us and our state, that is the gardener. Perhaps the gardener represents Jesus, or perhaps the Holy Spirit, or perhaps even the Father himself. Whoever it may be, this agent works with us and for us, on our side, to strengthen us for repentance and change, for transformation, so that we can actually see that transformation. In the same way that the gardener works with the barren tree, loosening the soil and working in manure, so does the Spirit, the Father, and/or Jesus himself work in us to help us repent and turn. We are not alone. God is on our side!

From Genesis to Revelation, God is a God of justice. And God is at the same time a God of grace, abiding love, and second chances. Not one or the other, but both at the same time. Holding us to his standard of holiness, but always quick to lift us up and help us along the road of repentance, transformation, and sanctification.

We must always be careful, when encountering passages like this one, lest we conclude that we can save ourselves by repenting and changing our behavior. Only Jesus can save us, and Jesus has already done that. We are saved by the grace of God alone, not by anything we can do. Our repentance is a response to that salvation, a free gift. But in some way, if we fail to repent we somehow reject the free gift, and then there are consequences to pay.

Thanks be to God, we don't have to turn ourselves around on our own. We have a gardener who is on our side.