

## A Sermon for DaySpring

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*Urgency and Patience*

Luke 13:1-9

March 23, 2025

Lent III

Our readings on this third Sunday in Lent speak with urgency about the need to respond and change when the need and time arises. That urgency is a good word in Lent—now is the time to change; now is the time for honest self-examination; to listen to God. This is the moment to begin again and come home.

Luke 13 begins, though, not with self-examination and reflection but with the things that distract us from it on a daily basis: salacious headlines about how awful other people are. It's much easier territory for most of us to inhabit. Two tragedies ripped from the headlines. In one awful story, the ruler murdered pilgrims from Galilee who had come to the temple. In the other story, in what appears to be an accident, a tower collapsed on a group of people and killed them. How to make sense of these things, they wonder. Their instinct is to chatter: these people in some way got what they deserved. Sin has consequences one way or the other. If bad things happened to them, they probably deserved it.

You might be surprised that Jesus has no time for this kind of harsh theological arithmetic. He has no time for the logic that says good things happen to good people, and bad things invariably happen to bad people. Sometimes, like Pilate, rulers have evil intentions and do bad things to individuals and nations. Sometimes they do it against religion, sometimes in the name of religion, but no matter, most of the time when powerful men decide to use their power without humility or decency, people get hurt, including lots of innocent people. And, sometimes, like the tower of Siloam, through no one's fault, towers fall, tornados hit, earthquakes shake the ground, and bad things happen for seemingly no reason at all. Life has tragedies and suffering, and it doesn't mean they deserved it more than you do, says the one who is heading toward the cross. He knows. He knows all too well.

I don't think the point here is to use tragedies to scare people. It's to point out that all of our lives are contingent on many things, some of which are out of our control. The use or misuse of power by those who have and exercise power over our lives, the vagaries of life's fortunes and misfortunes, and... and... and our own spiritual vitality. That's what Jesus wants them (and I suppose, us) to be concerned about. Unless you repent, he says, you'll perish like they did. It is a very Lenten kind of thing to say. In a very Lenten way, Jesus turns our attention back inward. Not in the sense of only worry about yourself, but in the sense of: every once in a while there comes a moment to look into the mirror of the soul and see what you see there.

In doing this, Jesus invites us to change our heart, to make a radical about-face on the path of our lives, and confront our compromises with evil and our hypocrisy--I think that nearly all of us has a little hypocrisy — in order to decidedly take up the path of the Gospel.

But again there is the temptation to justify ourselves. What should we convert from? Aren't we basically good people? — How many times have we thought this? "But after all I am a good man, I'm a good woman..." isn't that true? "Am I not a believer and even quite a churchgoer?" And we believe that this way we are justified.

This morning in Sunday School, I heard Christina tell the story of getting a pin growing up that read, "I go to Big Church," with a heart on it, and I love that idea. She said, "Shouldn't we have those?" And I thought, "Yes. We should have those." So I started looking it up—and I couldn't find them, but what did pop up was another kind of pin—vintage, from long ago, that said, "I go to Sunday School. Do you?" Who puts that on their shirt? I'm going to order a bunch of them—isn't that the spirit that we want to embody?

This being the time of Lent, this is a good time—anytime is a good time—to take a closer look at ourselves. And make changes we need to make. There is a note of urgency here that's important for us to hear and take in. What needs to change in our lives and what needs to change now? Like a river canyon, life's formation is a conspiracy of the slow disciplines that work on us over time and dramatic transformations that sweep through us in a moment, like a flood. Some of them, we welcome; we want them and need them.

In the center of the parable that Jesus tells, there's an unfruitful tree. The landowner wants to cut it down. He says it's a waste of soil. Can you imagine a harsher judgment? (Or a more devastating middle school taunt in an agrarian age—"you're nothing but a waste of soil"?) If there is any part of us worthy of such judgment, the time has come to deal with it. Either cut it out or redeem it. The landowner wants to cut it down. The gardener wants to work the soil for another year and give him and it another opportunity. "Give us more time. Give us a year to work the soil and produce fruit." Now we see there's urgency for change, and there's patience for the work. There's urgency and patience. We can be affected by the power of both in this story if the patience of God leads us to have a little holy impatience with ourselves. God's grace allows me to live another day. Let me use this day for good; let me change habits that are not bearing fruit. Let me begin habits that can bear fruit. Let me change what needs to be changed. This is the spiritual springboard Lent—and Jesus-- sets at our feet. These are the questions we are prompted to ask when we are honest with ourselves.

In the words of the ancient desert fathers and mothers this is the first step of discipleship—what they called "purgation"—purify your heart. Examine yourself, they invited Christians—examine every part of your life and give it all to God. I like the gardening version of this spiritual act. Pay attention. Work the soil. Let it breathe. Add some fertilizer. Be a little patient and go get to good work in God's grace.

We begin Lent by saying, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” And here remember God can do amazing things with a little dust and a little dirt. Like make a human. And like remake one, too. A little patient urgency is what it seems we need.

This same urgent impatience is also in our Isaiah reading. If Luke’s message is: *Where you are fruitless, tend the soil*, Isaiah’s image is: *You’ve gotten too comfortable where you don’t belong. it’s time to go home. Seek the Lord while he may be found.*

The time has come for a change, says Isaiah. God’s grace is opening a door for you. But it won’t stay open. A little context that I think will make this come alive for you in a better way. Isaiah 55 is the final chapter of a section from chapters 40-55 addressed to exiles in Babylon who are promised a return home to Israel. They’ve been there for 70 years. Now it’s time to go home and rebuild their lives and their nation. For many of them this is good news they’ve been waiting for. Everyone’s favorite parts of Isaiah are from this section:

*Comfort, comfort my people says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, her iniquity is pardoned, that she was received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice is crying in the wilderness: make straight a highway for our God. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.*

For many of them this was the news they’d patiently waited for, and now it’s time to go home. The door which was closed shut to them is now wide open, but it will not swing open forever. There’s patience, and there’s urgency.

Patience: Think of a little girl perched on a ledge trying to get up the courage to jump into her daddy’s outstretched arms. He keeps assuring her: “You’ve got this honey. Trust me. I know it looks a long way but you can do it. I will catch you.” Remember the flutter in the tummy of trying to make your legs bend and your feet jump when they refused to obey your commands to them? The daddy has patience for her because he understands and wants to reassure her of his trustworthiness.

Urgency: Now think of the same story, she’s on a ledge, her knees are bent, she just can’t move, he’s encouraging her to jump, but now the house behind her is burning behind her. “Trust me, honey. I know it’s a long way, but you can do it. I will catch you.” The daddy has urgency. The girl has fear. But it’s time to act. That’s Israel in Isaiah 55. It’s time to go.

For Israel in exile, the moment has come, but it will pass. And those who stay behind will lose their identity and their souls. It’s hard to imagine it was even much of a choice, but it was. Some of them were either afraid to leave where they’d become comfortable or didn’t want to hard work going home and rebuilding. Or just had made peace with empire-life. This is the most nefarious temptation—the empire takes you and then trains you to accept the stale crumbs it gives you in return for your soul and your community. Empires colonize nations and then they colonize spirits.

And so the invitation: “Exiles, come home, come to the waters that flow and so do milk for babies and wine for adults. Come to the feast at the table that’s set for you. Why spend your life, your one precious life, on what doesn’t matter—for that which is not bread and that which does not satisfy, when if you’ll trust me and follow me, I’ll lead you to a feast and into my covenantal love.”

“Eh, you know, I think I’m ok just staying here a little longer.” There were exiles who had so settled in and settled for Babylon that they’d forgotten their true home and forgotten their true God. Babylon has a way of doing that. Change is hard, especially when you grow comfortable and even lazy where you are, even if where you are isn’t great and you’re not happy and you’re not fulfilled and you’re not serving anyone from any good fruit from your life. Still, even then, change is hard. We tend to like the familiar and comfortable. The motto of Babylon is “Hey, it may not be so great, but it works ok for me now.”

You weren’t meant to live like that. You weren’t meant to live like that.

*Holy Urgency.* The parable makes it plain. A tree that bears no fruit is a waste of soil.

*Holy Patience.* Give it another year. Give me a little more time for the good work. I know what to do now.

*Holy Urgency.* Come home. It’s time to come home.

*Holy patience.* The mercy of God leaves us this day as time for conversion.

The patience of God prompts the urgency of conversion. The possibility of conversion is not unlimited; it is necessary to seize it immediately; otherwise it might be lost forever. This Lent, we can consider: what do I have to do now to draw nearer to the Lord, to “cut out” those things that are not good? To leave behind the things I cling to for security that are, in fact killing me?

What must I do before this mercy of God who awaits me and who forgives? What must I do? We can have great trust in God’s mercy but without abusing it. We must not justify spiritual laziness but increase our commitment to respond promptly to this mercy with heartfelt sincerity.

We all need to take a step forward; and God’s patience and mercy accompanies us in this urgent task of our lives. Despite the barrenness that marks our lives at times, God is patient and offers us the possibility to change and to make progress toward the transformation we need. And this invitation is set before us today.