

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

A Gardener's Skilled Hand

Luke 13.1-9

March 20, 2022

Two harrowing stories and a call to repentance frame our Gospel reading this morning. That seems appropriate for a Gospel reading in Lent. It also seems appropriate for such a time as this when harrowing stories constitute the news these days all around us. Every moment in time has some kind of event framing it. There's always something going on and often something troubling. Some seasons just have more than others.

In Luke 13, two stories are mentioned, a mass murder by the state and a tragic accident. Did you hear about . . .? Can you believe . . .? Have you heard . . .? What does it mean? Have you heard about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices? Have you heard about those poor people the tower fell on? Why did that happen? Was God angry at them? Why?

In other words, there had been some Jews from Galilee, the northern region of Israel, they came to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices. When they were there at the temple, Pilate, the Roman governor, had them murdered. The blood of the slain Galileans mingled with the blood of their sacrifices to God. They were killed in the temple.

Jews were accustomed to living under Roman rule. They were not happy about it but accustomed to it, to the harsh rule of Rome. Until now Rome would let you worship as you please in your own sanctuary. So, for Pilate to blatantly murder Jewish pilgrims in the sacred space of the temple was a grief, like an earthquake roiling through the consciousness of the people. It was like a violation of a code, something like a war crime. It's one of those times when it happens you feel in your bones: it feels like something has changed. The significance is like we've stepped across some kind of threshold into a different era. The ground under our feet has moved, and we're not sure exactly where we stand anymore.

"What does this mean?" They asked Jesus. If they hoped he'd make them feel better, he hardly could have done otherwise. Don't think that those Galileans who suffered had done something egregiously wrong, he said. They were like all Galileans. He went on. And if you think it's just Galileans who suffer tragedies, remember the tragic accident, the tower of Siloam that fell and killed those 18 people in Jerusalem. They weren't worse people than those who survived. They were just people like you or like me. Unless the world changes, this is the kind of fate that awaits you all because this is the way the world can be. That's what Jesus is saying when he says, "you must repent or you, too, will perish." You repent is plural. You all repent. All of you. Repentance isn't about being filled and tormented by guilt. It means conversion of the heart, which leads to conversion of relationships and all of life. Jesus speaks of the need for repentance in the widest possible terms to the widest possible audience. All the world needs to change because the way of the world leads to destruction. We know this in our own lives; our

own sin can wreck destruction in the lives of those around us and in our own lives. And we know this writ large: the fallenness of the world begets grief and sorrow and destruction of lives all around. Jesus is painting a picture and calling for a new world fostered by a conversion of hearts.

People killed unjustly by a murderous regime; people killed by a tragic accident. These first century stories of disorder of the world have so many parallels to our moment and all the stories and headlines that are on our minds and hearts today. And I know you're feeling it. I know you are.

A news headline this week read, "Covid. War. Recession fears. The Stock Market Can't Keep Up." I'm thinking: the stock market can't keep up? How about anybody? Nobody can't keep up!

Covid. War. Recession Fears. Climate Change. Elections. And you know what you personally carry on your own shoulders—those concerns, those relationships, those bodies, those hopes, worries that are yours, maybe not yours alone, but are definitely, 100% yours to carry.

It's hardly a surprise when The New York Times reports that "Americans are a pretty anxious people. Nearly one in five of us — 18 percent — has an anxiety disorder. We spend over \$2 billion a year on anti-anxiety medications. College students are often described as more stressed than ever before. There are many explanations for these nerves: a bad job market, less cohesive communities, the constant self-comparison that is social media. In 2002 the World Mental Health Survey found that Americans were the most anxious people in the 14 countries studied, with more clinically significant levels of anxiety than people in Nigeria, Lebanon and Ukraine."ⁱ

The thing is, that article was from 2015, 7 years ago. There's been a lot of life since then.

In 2016 the Times headline read, "Anxiety and Depression are on an 80- year upswing"ⁱⁱ

In 2017: "America's New Anxiety Disorder"ⁱⁱⁱ

In 2018: A Lot of Americans are a lot more Anxious than they were^{iv}

In 2020: A third of Americans now show signs of clinical anxiety or depression amid coronavirus pandemic^v

In March 2022, the American Psychological Association released their now annual assessment on the two-year anniversary of the Covid-19 pandemic declaration just this month.^{vi}

Nothing here will surprise you:

87% say rise in prices of ordinary items due to inflation is a significant cause of stress

81% cite supply chain issues as a significant cause of stress

81% cite global uncertainty

80% potential retaliation from Russia

80% Russian invasion of Ukraine

69% say they fear Russian invasion of Ukraine will lead to nuclear war.

Goodness, I remember feeling that was as a child living under the landing pattern of B52s at Carswell Airforce Base in Ft. Worth. I never thought a new generation so soon would be hiding under their desks like we were back then.

The report goes on to detail high rates of stress caused by money, relationships, and Covid, which are all intertwined in our experiences in endless ways. They dubbed our collective state as survival mode.

I hesitate to talk so much about anxiety because sometimes anxiety begets anxiety. Fear begets fear. Anger begets anger. These monsters can feed on themselves until you start to feel like if I don't feel anxious, fearful, or angry, I don't remember I'm alive. People spiral this way. And yet, if we don't acknowledge the reality of our hearts, we're not being human. And we need a lot more real live humans in the world these days. You're human. Do you remember that? And so are the people around you.

You aren't alone. We all just need a moment, okay? Sometimes we just need a moment to sit with the pain—the pain that we experience, the pain that we share in solidarity with others, but sometimes the pain that we cause in the lives of others around us. We need to let our prayers and our tears be mingled with the sacrifices being paid by so many. Christian faith and hope for life have never been lived immune from the sufferings and death of the world. Our prayers join the psalmist and all who cry out, "O God, you are my God, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Ps 63) In a dry and weary land, in a spiritually dry and emotionally exhausting time, my soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast." This is our prayer. It must be. We must hold on to faith and to hold on to hope and to cling to love even in the dry land of despair.

Of course, we don't just want to NOT be anxious or afraid or angry. We want to live redemptively. We want to bear the fruit of compassion and empathy and love. We don't just want to survive, to be in survival mode; we want to live and bless the lives of others by our living. Sometimes we come to the point where we wonder if that can ever be possible again. And then right into those places and right into the despair of the world, Jesus tells a story about a fig tree.

The fig tree was alive but not thriving, not blessing others. It was taking life from the soil, but not giving life through its fruit. The landowner was talking with the gardener about it. They were studying it. Then he said, "Cut it down. Why should it be taking up space? Something like that is useless." Sometimes the landowner is seen in the story as the image of God, and maybe so—maybe we can read the story that way. But I also think it is the story of the person in the mirror who looks back at themselves and says, "This thing that I am looking at is useless. Why should it continue on anymore?"

But the gardener's voice is also heard. The gardener is the one who knows the tree better than the tree knows itself. The gardener is the one whose hands are in the dirt. You'll know a

gardener by the dirt under their fingernails. The landowner has rings on his fingers and puts on gloves when he gets in the garden. The gardener just plunges his hands in.

The gardener says, “Just give it another year. Let me work with it. I’ll dig around it and put some compost around its roots. I’ll take care of it. Just give me a year.” And in the midst of this moment, with these people all around Jesus, with these heart-felt, heavy, existential concerns and despair, this little story starts to crack open just a little bit of light. Just a little bit of fresh air. And you know where fresh air comes from, right? It comes from trees.

The little tree isn’t cut down—this little Charlie Brown fig tree. It lives on. It has another chance because it’s cared for by one who knows how to care for it. It’s not lost of us that in the face of despair, anxiety, fear, and death Jesus turns to a story about gardening and compost. Can compost save the world? I don’t think so, but people who compost—they are people who are a part of saving the world. When you take part in composting, you’re retelling and reliving a story as someone who won’t give up hope. As we’ve learned around here over the last year, compost is something dead brought back to life; discarded trash, food scraps, dead leaves and such are brought together for a time, joined by heat and the magnificent microscopic community of bacteria, fungi, and bugs who do their thing until what looked like garbage, by grace---and it is grace---comes alive, that then when it’s mixed in the soil around a plant or a tree, like the fig tree in the story, gives life deep in the soil and high in the branches.

So, this is a story of hope from despair, light from darkness, new fruit from inert life, of a future from trash. This is a story of death giving way to life. It is an Easter story, and God knows we need some Easter stories.

In the early 20th century, in the face of the grave challenges of his generation, German pastor Eberhard Arnold wrote about our community with one another in Christ:

God is the source of life. On him and through him our common life is built up and led time and again through cataclysmic struggles to final victory. It is an exceedingly dangerous way, a way of deep suffering. It is a way that leads straight into the struggle for existence and the reality of a life of work, into all the difficulties created by the human character. And yet, just this is our deepest joy: to see clearly the eternal struggle – the indescribable tension between life and death, man’s position between heaven and hell – and still to believe in the overwhelming power of life, the power of love to overcome, and the triumph of truth, because we believe in God.^{vii}

May you be encouraged for today in God who gives the gift of life and in Jesus Christ who renews all who thirst for life and for love for truth. Harrowing stories and a call for repentance frame our lives today, but God’s gardening hands are deep in the soil of our souls, bringing life, life, life. Thanks be to the God of life and life evermore. Amen.

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1. ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/opinion/sunday/the-anxious-americans.html>
 2. ⁱⁱ <https://www.google.com/search?q=new+york+times+80%25+americans+anxious&oq=new+york+times+80%25+americans+anxious&aqs=chrome..69i57.7461j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#:~:text=Anxiety%20and%20Depression,80%2Dyears%2Dyoung%2D...>
 3. ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/magazine/americas-new-anxiety-disorder.html>
 4. ^{iv} <https://time.com/5269371/americans-anxiety-poll/>
 5. ^v <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/26/americans-with-depression-anxiety-pandemic/>
 6. ^{vi} <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2022/march-2022-survival-mode>
 7. ^{vii} https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/communal-living/thomas-merton-building-community-on-gods-love?utm_source=Plough+-+English&utm_campaign=4c2d68911e-Weekly_2022_03_18&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_4cbb94afa4-4c2d68911e-295533177