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The Lesson of the Fig Tree

Text: Isaiah 55:1-13; St. Luke 13:1-9

After last month's earthquake in Haiti, it surely was as certain to follow as thunder follows lightening that televangelist Pat Robertson would pronounce himself on behalf of God with respect to the moral cause of that natural disaster. In this case, he blamed it on a pact with the devil made in the eighteenth century by slaves who rebelled against their French masters and freed Haiti. It, of course, was not clear why God waited two hundred years to do this, instead of taking care of the original makers of the pact. Nor was it clear why the French got off for owning slaves. But, never mind, the pronouncement followed a well established pattern for Robertson, who in recent years has claimed that Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans was God's punishment for America's abortion policy, and also hinted that there might be a supernatural tie between Katrina and the events of September 11. The latter event he thought, concurring with Jerry Falwell, was due to the ACLU, pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians. Not that Robertson's prophetic mode is a recent development, either. Several years ago he claimed to have deflected a hurricane by prayer, he predicted a tsunami would hit in the northwest United States, and he declared that Israel's prime minister Ariel Sharon's stroke in 2006 was God's punishment for Sharon's dividing up God's land in a land for peace deal with the Palestinians.

Any number of Christian churches and leaders have denounced Robertson. They have made very clear that he does not represent them nor does he speak for them. Nor, in fact, many have said, is his thinking even Christian. It is really far more representative of the superstitious and magical thinking of the pagans that he decries so loudly.

Still, he gets a lot of play in the public media, and probably does so because he represents a pagan urge many people have. I suspect that it is an almost irresistible urge, if one believes in a moral maker of the universe, to seek in that maker's mind for an ultimate and unmysterious cause for disasters that befall us. And, we think, it has to be a moral cause. Simple physical causality such as the fragility of flesh, the hardness of steel, or weather patterns don't suffice to answer the "why?" that we ask. We don't allow accidents, only judgments. Thus in the case of simple and natural death, we ask why God has taken our loved one from us. In the case of accident or disease or misfortune we wonder why God did this, what God's purpose might have been. We get angry at God as if he had personally thwarted us and disappointed us. We assume we are being punished, but we don't think we deserve quite what we got – but we're not entirely sure, either.

Yet since God's mind is as inscrutable as the urge to assume one knows God's mind is irresistible, all our speculation about God's motives must remain only that – speculation. When we don't realize that, we launch ourselves headlong into superstition and magical thinking, believing that small "what ifs" can change, or could have changed our fate and the fate of those we love. But the fact of the matter is that we cannot penetrate God's mind on these things. God, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, clearly says: "My ways are not your ways, nor are my thoughts your thoughts, for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts, and my ways than your ways."

Jesus himself says the same thing. In this morning's Gospel lesson, the disciples have apparently been commenting on the day's news. Pilate, the cruel Roman governor, has once more reinforced his authority by an act of terror, for he has killed some Galileans and mixed their blood in the sacrifices they were making. "And did you hear about the tower in Siloam that

fell down, perhaps the result of an earthquake, killing eighteen people?” Now, it appears that in commenting on these events, the disciples have also been speculating as to why these things happened. “What awful thing had the Galileans done to deserve this fate?”, they wondered. “What made them worse than other people that God would let them be done to them? What pact with the devil had the people killed at Siloam made that justified their death under a falling tower?” Jesus, however, with great philosophical clarity tells them that it is pointless to try to make the Galileans’ sin proportionate to their suffering in order to justify it. They weren’t any worse than anybody else, and their sin had nothing to do the real cause of this atrocity which was Pilate’s cruelty. God wasn’t punishing anybody in these disasters. So Jesus, too, resists magical thinking and superstition.

But, he quickly goes on and warns the disciples, don’t assume therefore that there are no consequences to sin. Don’t assume that the world, human, natural or divine, is indifferent to right and wrong, or indifferent to moral effort and moral laxity, or to love and callousness. Don’t assume that wrong or laxity or callousness won’t be treated appropriately. Yet, in saying that, Jesus is not hedging on his critique of superstition and magical thinking. Rather, he is looking at the situation in a very different way. How he looks at it, and what he is telling his disciples to get serious about comes in the parable he then proceeds to tell them.

“Let me give you an example of what exactly I mean by the need to repent,” he says. “Let me tell you a parable to illustrate what I mean. ‘A man had a fig tree, and when he went to gather fruit from it, he found that there was none. In fact, it hadn’t had any figs in three years. Time to cut it down, and make space for something that will bear fruit, he thought. His gardener, however, asks him to give the tree one more chance. He, the gardener, says that he will make sure it is fertilized and aerated. If it still doesn’t bear fruit next year, well, then, sure go ahead

and cut it down.’’

What is he driving at in this parable? To be frank, it doesn't seem to illustrate his earlier point all that clearly.

Well, according to the ancient church, and even to contemporary biblical scholars what seems to be at stake in this parable is a question about the status of Israel. Israel, God's elect, had not borne the fruit that God had expected when he chose them. It had not been the kingdom of priests and the holy nation that he brought it out of the land of Egypt to be. Thus, Jesus is saying that if they did not bear the expected fruit, even after all that the prophets had spoken in the past, or that John the Baptist and Jesus had spoken to them in the present, well, then, it would be replaced. In short, the Gentiles would be let in.

Contemporary biblical scholars tell us that if this is the point of the parable then it reflects the situation in the early church as it became less and less a physical continuation of Israel and more and more a church populated by Gentiles. The parable reflects a genuine and abiding concern in the early church: how could God's promise to Israel be abrogated? It also reflects the early church's answer to that question; namely, Israel didn't want to do what was expected of it and therefore the Gentiles entered in, along with some in Israel who had responded.

All that is true enough. But simply to leave the issue as a historical one misses the deeper point which is timeless, for just about every first century criticism of Israel's failures can also be taken in the present day as a criticism and warning directed to the now established church. It also misses the deeper point of what Jesus is telling the disciples when he tells them that, although God does not chase down individual sins or sinners with accidents, political oppression or natural disasters, repentance is still needed.

The deeper point is this one. God is determined to win. God will win. God is determined that there will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God is determined that humanity will flourish, despite our best attempts to make a mess of human life. Now, it may not be at all obvious to anybody how God is going to accomplish that, but God will accomplish it.

This is a point that Isaiah makes. For Isaiah, after saying that God's ways are not our ways, nor are God's thoughts the same as our thoughts, goes on to assert this: "For as surely as the rain comes down from heaven, watering the earth, making it give forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the hungry, so shall be the word of my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall do that which I purpose, and accomplish the thing for which I sent it."

If this is the case, then righteousness, which is what God's Word purposes, *will* reign among men and women. Their dealings with each other *will not* be marked forever by competition, envy, false dealings, and the violence of word and deed that comes inevitably from such dealings for taking away these things is what God means. If this is the case, then, good news *will* be told, and the world *will* be turned upside down. If this is the case, then every tear *will* be wiped dry. If this is the case, if God's word does not return to God empty, then that means that all of these things *will* happen, even if we don't understand how God makes them happen. God's inscrutability is in how he succeeds at righteousness, not how he punishes.

But if these things will happen, then repentance means above all getting with the program. It means that the repentance that Jesus is talking about is not a matter of trying to avoid God's secret judgement, for God's judgement is not a matter of trying to accomplish his will by threatening us and pushing us into thinking and willing rightly. Human society may use punishment as a corrective or as a deterrent to make people better. It is the only way we have to enforce the civil order. But God doesn't have to do that. God doesn't do that. God has no need to

punish anybody because they are getting in his way of making happen what he wants to happen. After all, no human being can stop God from doing what God intends to do. That is Isaiah's point. But if that is the case, then, repentance means above all getting on board, and not resisting life any longer. It means opening up, not shutting down. Repentance means being fertile, it means bearing fruit, instead of living a barren and fruitless life. Repentance means believing that God will give every good thing that God has promised.

During Lent this is an important reflection about repentance to make a part of our individual lives. To be sure, Lent always seem to be about giving up something, but it is giving up what gets in the way of our bearing fruit. It is, for example, a matter of giving up vanity, or of an image of the self that is concocted out of the imitation of the shallow things we see around us, or of giving up self indulgence. But giving all that up is in the interest of becoming spiritually fertile – for the person who is not vain, who is not shallow, who is not self indulgent is the one who actually can bear fruit.

But this reflection about repentance being a matter of getting with the program is also to be taken to heart especially by the church. The parable of the fig tree suggests that a religious establishment that has become complacent, and that presumes upon its place in God's plan can easily cease to bear fruit. Jesus thought it had happened in Israel; it is something that has also happened all too often in the American church. Let me simply throw out some statistics that are symptomatic and emblematic, and let me invite you to do the math.

One: For years when I taught undergraduates at the beginning of a course I informally quizzed them on their religious knowledge. Over a period of a number of years, consistently 80% of them had no idea of who the Trinity is. This was in a school where 90% of the students were self-reporting Christians.

Two: A couple of weeks ago, Christian Smith, one of the foremost sociologists of religion in the country, reported at the Reformed Institute colloquy that a person had a statistically greater chance of being an active church member in his or her mid-twenties if he or she had *no* church experience in their teens than if they were a member of a mainline church. This is to say, statistically, whatever goes on in the lives of mainline Protestant children, seems *more* detrimental for acting on their baptismal faith in adulthood than just doing nothing. There are, of course, exceptions. There are those who do come back to church and are active. Why are they different? Smith suggested that the chief factors such people hold in common are first of all that their parents practiced the faith, and practiced it with them, and second, they reported being influenced by other adults within the church. This is not surprising. I remember studies from the 1970s that said these were the most important things in making Christian education effective. That our children show so poorly, may well indicate that despite having the key to knowledge, we have kept the door locked, that we have not practiced faith at home or in church with the children who mean so much to us, and that they also have little meaningful contact with other adults of faith.

Here are two more statistics. Consistently, over the last twenty years or so at this church the average attendance over the year long has hovered around the 40% mark. The average Presbyterian church is about 50%. However, since we get a lot of visitors every Sunday, the actual average percentage of members who attend this church on any given Sunday is probably somewhere in the low 30s. Second statistic: today we didn't have half dozen kids in Sunday school. We never do.

God does not scare people into righteousness or look for secret faults to punish; God is about bearing fruit. But God's word will not return to him empty; it will bear fruit. The only

question is whether it will bear fruit in us, or whether this a fig tree that needs replacing.