

IN GOD'S TIME

March 24, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Luke 13:1-9

SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he 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.'"

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

Five and half weeks ago, some of the top scientists at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration announced that they had come to a sad but inevitable conclusion. The mission of the Mars' rover *Opportunity*, or "Oppy" as it was often called, had come to an end. It was quite an incredible run. Oppy was launched from earth on July 7, 2003 and landed on the surface of Mars on January 25, 2004. It was powered by solar panels, designed to fold up and hibernate when the weather blocked the sun, but then open up and recharge when the sky was clear. The planned mission was for it to operate for around 90 days before it would run out of power or have some major malfunction. Instead of 90 days, Oppy kept rolling along for close to 15 years.

Among other things we learned from Oppy was that there are sedimentary rock formations on Mars, indicating that at one time there were probably oceans on the surface. Oppy discovered a meteorite, the first to be studied that had not traveled through earth's atmosphere. The rover explored the Victoria Crater, that is about a half a mile across and 200 feet deep. It then went on to explore the Endeavor Crater, that is 14 miles across and 1000 feet deep. By the end, *Opportunity* traveled around 28 miles and sent back an incredible amount of scientific data that will be studied for years to come.

But in June of 2018, satellites orbiting Mars detected a massive dust storm that would pummel the rover. The last signal received from Oppy was on June 20. After the storm had passed, NASA tried again and again to signal the rover. They kept hoping that gentler winds would blow the dust off the solar panels, enabling them to recharge the batteries, and get the rover functioning again. But either the dust that settled from the storm was too thick, or Oppy had been damaged by the storm in some other way. After over 1000 signals trying various commands, the team was finally forced to admit that the Mars rover *Opportunity* was no longer functional and the mission had come to an end. But after nearly 15 years, there could be no regrets, only gratitude for success far beyond what they imagined. The last radio signal that the team sent to the rover was a recording of the jazz great Billie Holiday singing, "I'll Be Seeing You." The last line from the song goes, "I'll be looking at the moon, but I'll be seeing you."

It is an amazing story, especially since many of us are caught up in an impatient “now” culture, where information is just a click away and next-day delivery is never a problem. We become impatient if it takes us more than 20 seconds for our laptops to boot up, and if we text a family member and they don’t respond in 10 minutes we are about ready to dial 911. But some things, even high tech things, take time and there is nothing to be done about it other than wait. It took more than 6 months for Opportunity to land on the Martian surface. Once it was there it was not like the engineers could simply move it around with a joystick. Radio signals, traveling at the speed of light, would take between 3 to 22 minutes to travel between Earth and Mars, depending where the two planets were in their orbits. And the story of Opportunity reminds us that under certain circumstances it is necessary to be patient and wait. The rover traveled 28 miles over 15 years. That is not exactly a speed record, but those 15 years were important and yielded all sorts of incredibly important information.

Our scripture lesson for this morning is about looking at things from an entirely different perspective, and it is about time, the realization that our timing is not always God’s timing. It is a rather odd section of scripture that is open to all kinds of misinterpretations, and it starts with the description of horrendous tragedy. Jesus had been teaching when it appears that some of his listeners interrupted him. They told him a story that seems to come right out of today’s breaking news report. Some people from his home territory of Galilee had been slaughtered while at worship on the orders of Pontius Pilate.

We are not exactly certain of why these listeners interrupted Jesus with this terrible story, but based on the verses from the end of the previous chapter we might be able to make a guess. In Luke 12:54-56, Jesus scolds the crowd for not being able to understand what is happening, for not knowing the signs of the times. He says that if we are able to understand what is happening with the weather, we should be able to realize what God is doing in this world. Then in Luke 12:57-59, Jesus goes on to say that we should work out our differences with one another and strive to live in peace.

So it is possible that Jesus’ listeners are responding by protesting that they do understand the signs of the times, and this massacre is one of them. Another possibility is that they are suggesting that there are sinful people in this world with whom there is no chance for reconciliation. They might have considered these Galileans as terrible sinners and that is why God allowed them to be killed. Jesus could not expect them to live in peace with evil people such as them, could he?

As I ponder all this I am struck by how after 2000 years nothing seems to change. When the towers came down on 9-11, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, even last summer when there were those terrible wildfires in California, there were preachers who were saying that this was evidence of God’s judgement. These preachers were suggesting that we, as a nation, or even particular regions of country were being punished for terrible sins that had been committed.

But Jesus replies, “You have it all wrong. This tragedy is not a sign of the times. You cannot see cause and effect here. Whether we are talking about a human created tragedy, or something that is completely an accident, such as people being killed after a tower collapses, none of this says anything about the victim’s righteousness or sinfulness. Everyone needs to repent, whether things are going well for you or you find yourself caught up in a life shattering crisis.”

Jesus then goes on to tell a parable. A wealthy landowner had a vineyard and in the middle of it he planted a fig tree. After the tree grew to maturity, he came around at the time of year when figs were usually ripe, hoping to harvest some fruit, but there was nothing on the tree. Well, maybe it needed to grow a little more, so he waited another year, but still no fruit. The man was disappointed, but didn’t think too much about it. He had other assets. So another year went by, and still no figs on the fig tree. Now, some of the old Jewish rabbis had taught that a righteous person must be willing to forgive at least three times. By saying that three years had passed Jesus was saying that the landowner had been more than patient with this useless fig tree. He had done his part and no one could expect anything more from him.

So the landowner gives an order to the groundskeeper. This tree was not doing any good. Cut it down and make room for something else that is more productive. It was all very logical and appropriate. But the groundskeeper said, "Wait a while. Let me give this tree a little more attention. Let me fertilize it, and water it, and next year we will see what happens. Then if you like you can cut it down."

Now, there are many who would interpret this as a harsh parable with a strong message of judgement. So here we are in the third week of Lent, and this is supposed to be a time of repentance. This text seems to indicate that we had better get at it and be quick about it. After all, the landowner must be God and we are the fig tree. Time is running out. God's patience is wearing thin. We have already been given three years. So unless we change, and change quick, we will be cut down and chopped up for fire wood.

After all these years as your pastor, I think most of you know that I am not one to preach such a sermon with lots of threats and judgement. First of all, I don't think such sermons are effective. I am called to preach the Gospel, and the very word "gospel" means good news. My goal when we worship is to get us to a point where we respond, "Praise God, Yes!" rather than "Dear God, No!" So you won't hear me preaching a sermon like that.

Furthermore, I don't believe this is the correct interpretation of this parable. I say this because we often misunderstand what Jesus is talking about when he says we need to repent. We think repentance is the same thing as apologizing. When Jesus tells us we need to repent we think we need to feel bad for what we have done and say we are sorry. We think it is supposed to be embarrassing, humiliating and therefore very difficult. But the term that Jesus uses again and again throughout the Gospels was originally not a religious term. It did not have anything to do with ethical behavior, and recognizing your actions were displeasing to God. About the best translation of the original term would be something like "to get your bearings and head in the right direction." It is a term that comes from desert nomads who use landmarks, as well as the sun, moon and stars to navigate across vast stretches of wilderness. This term would refer to travelers who have been lost and disoriented. They have been using the wrong object to guide their way. Then, maybe quite suddenly, they see things clearly and know the direction they need to go. It may be a complete 180 degree turn around and they head in the opposite direction. Or it may be the realization that they are not that far off, but a slight adjustment is needed. Now, there might be a bit of embarrassment at being so mistaken, but by far there is a greater feeling of relief, a realization of the truth, even perhaps joy and excitement at knowing where you need to go at last after being uncertain and frightened. As one scholar put it, true repentance is not so much a matter of looking back and saying, "I'm sorry!" as it is looking to the future and saying, "Wow! Things can be different!"

So that is one reason why I don't think this parable is supposed to be interpreted as a harsh judgement and a threat. But the other problem with such an interpretation is our cultural perception of time. Those of us from Western Europe and North America, we see time as linear, precise and measurable. We talk about the past, present and future. We can talk about something happening two hundred years ago in the past, or 130 days in the future. Time is a straight continuous line for us, like a road. We know where we have been, where we are and hopefully where we are going. Africans and Asians don't see time this way. They see it more in terms of cycles or spirals or waves. Yes, there is a flow to time, but what matters more is the present, the here and now, and making the most of where you are in this point of the cycle.

When we Westerners read this parable of the fig tree, we get hung up on the idea that the tree has only one year to shape up. Time is limited and running out for that tree. It is facing a very real danger of being chopped down and discarded. We have a tendency to look at the story and say, "That poor cursed fig tree. Dear God, No!" But that is our cultural bias. Jesus was not a white Western European with blond hair and blue eyes. His skin was brown and he was from the Middle East. So he thought more like someone from Africa or Asia and regarded time quite differently from the way we do.

With this perspective, yes, we must admit the tree is indeed completely useless. It is not doing what it should be doing. It is taking up space and possibly robbing nutrients from other plants that are producing fruit. So the rational thing would be to get rid of it and move on to something else. Yet, right now, right here in the present, the groundskeeper interferes and urges that the tree be spared. And not merely spared but fed and cared for, we might say pampered and groomed. This is gospel. This is good news. I think Jesus wanted us to hear this story and say, "That lucky, blessed fig tree. Praise God, Yes!"

These nine verses from Luke are a bit odd and often misinterpreted, but if we do look at them the right way they offer a message of grace, a story of God's love, mercy, patience and forgiveness. I think God is a little like mission control trying to contact the Martian rover, Opportunity. God doesn't want it to end, and is willing to do anything and everything that can possibly be done to keep the mission going. God is continually sending us signal after signal, trying to get us to respond, to turn in the right direction, to give even the slightest indication that we know God is there and are willing to interact with him. It doesn't matter how long it takes. It is not a matter of days or months or years. It is all in God's time, and God is willing to take whatever time is needed to reach out to us.

That is what the season of Lent is all about. It is about stepping back from our frantic push button, everything-done-in-an-instant lifestyle. It is about waiting and taking the time we need to take to find our way into God's time. It is about pausing to see where we are, to get our bearings so that we are certain we are heading in the right direction. It is about listening to the signals God is trying to send to us. It is about being grateful for God's grace and mercy that pampers us and grooms us until we are able to produce an abundance of fruit. I heard a story about a pastor who when he was in seminary did some of his training by serving as a chaplain in a state prison. In this prison there was a young man who had committed an armed robbery in a little town on the other side of the state. He had a long prison sentence of many years. He was angry and bitter. Each week the young man's father came to visit him, but each time the inmate refused to see him. The father asked this chaplain intern to intervene, to plead with the young man to see his father, but it was no use.

It developed into a routine. Each week the father would take off early from work, drive the five hours across the state in hopes of seeing his son. Each week this young seminarian would go back to the cell and ask, "Do you want to see your dad?" Then he would go back to the waiting room and tell the father that his son had once again refused a visit. The father would thank the seminarian, pull on his coat and hat, head out the door, get in the car and drive those five hours home.

One day, after telling the father that once again, his son would not meet with him, the chaplain intern said, "Why are you doing this? It is a waste of time. Your son is an angry, defiant young man. Give up. Go home and get on with your life. No one would put up with this kind of rejection week after week. Why are you doing this? It all seems so useless."

"Well, perhaps you are right," said the father. "But it has been thousands of years, and God hasn't given up on us." With that he gathered up his things and left.

My friends, that is the story of the useless fig tree. It hasn't been three years. It has been thousands of years, and God has not given up on us. But the number of years doesn't matter, because it is all in God's time. Praise God, Yes! In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.